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COLONEL ABEL PARGITER was sitting after luncheon in his club talking. Since his companions in the leather armchairs were men of his own type, men who had been soldiers, civil servants, men who had now retired, they were reviving with old jokes and stories now their past in India, Africa, Egypt, and then, by a natural transition, they turned to the present. It was a question of some appointment, of some possible appointment.

Suddenly the youngest and the sprucest of the three leant forward. Yesterday he had lunched with . . . Here the voice of the speaker fell. The others bent towards him; with a brief wave of his hand Colonel Abel dismissed the servant who was removing the coffee cups. The three baldish and greyish heads remained close together for a few minutes. Then Colonel Abel threw himself back in his chair. The curious gleam which had come into all their eyes when Major Elkin began his story had faded completely from Colonel Pargiter's face. He sat staring ahead of him with bright blue eyes that seemed a little screwed up, as if the glare of the East were still in them; and puckered at the corners as if the dust were still in them. Some thought had struck him that made what the others were saying of no interest to him; indeed, it was disagreeable to him. He rose and looked out of the window down into Piccadilly. Holding his cigar suspended he looked down on the tops of omnibuses, hansom cabs, victorias, vans and landaus. He was out of it all, his attitude seemed to say; he had no longer any finger in that pie. Gloom settled on his red handsome face as he stood gazing. Suddenly a thought struck him. He had a question to ask; he turned to ask it; but his friends were gone. The little group had broken up. Elkins was already hurrying through the door; Brand had moved off to talk to another man. Colonel Pargiter shut his mouth on the thing he might have said, and turned back again to the window overlooking Piccadilly. Everybody in the crowded street, it seemed, had some end in view. Everybody was hurrying along to keep some appointment. Even the ladies in their victorias and broughams were trotting down Piccadilly on some errand or other. It was a fine blowing afternoon in April 1880. People were coming back to London; they were settling in for the season. But for him there would be no season; for him there was nothing to do. His wife was dying; but she did not die. She was better today; would be worse tomorrow; a new nurse was coming; and so it went on. He picked up a paper and turned over the pages. He looked at a picture of the west front of Cologne Cathedral. He tossed the paper back into its place among the other papers. One of these days—that was his euphemism for the time when his wife was dead—he would give up London, he thought, and live in the country. But then there was the house; then there were the children; and there was also . . . his face changed; it became less discontented; but also it became a little furtive and uneasy.

He had somewhere to go, after all. While they were gossiping he had kept that thought at the back of his mind. When he turned round and found them gone, that was the balm he clapped on his wound. He would

go and see Mira; Mira at least would be glad to see him. Thus when he left the club he turned not East, where the busy men were going; nor West where his own house in Abercorn Terrace was; but took his way along the hard paths through the Green Park towards Westminster. The grass was very green; the leaves were beginning to shoot; little green claws, like birds' claws, were pushing out from the branches; there was a sparkle, an animation everywhere; the air smelt clean and brisk. But Colonel Pargiter saw neither the grass nor the trees. He marched through the Park, in his closely buttoned coat, looking straight ahead of him. But when he came out in the streets of Westminster he slackened; he paused, looking into shop windows—not that he was interested in fishing-rods or in sporting prints, but when he reached this quarter of London he felt furtive. He did not like this part of the business at all. Every time he approached the little street that lay under the huge bulk of the Abbey, the street of dingy little houses, with yellow curtains and cards in the window, the street where the muffin man seemed always to be ringing his bell, where children screamed and hopped in and out of white chalk-marks on the pavement, he paused, looked to the right, looked to the left; and then walked very sharply to Number Thirty and rang the bell. He gazed straight at the door as he waited with his head rather sunk. He did not wish to be seen standing on that door-step. He did not like waiting to be let in. He did not like it when Mrs Sims let him in. There was always a smell in the house; there was always a pail of water at the foot of the stairs; there were always dirty clothes hanging on a line in the back garden: or at least they seemed to him dirty. He went up the stairs, sulkily and heavily, and entered the sitting room.

Nobody was there; he was too early. He looked round the room with distaste. There were too many little objects about. He felt out of place, and altogether too large as he stood upright before the draped fireplace in front of a screen upon which was painted a kingfisher in the act of alighting on some bulrushes. Footsteps scurried about hither and thither on the floor above. Was there somebody else up there with her? he asked himself listening. Children screamed in the street outside. It was sordid; it was mean; it was furtive. One of these days, he said to himself . . . but the door opened and his mistress, Mira, came in.

"Oh Bogy, dear!" she exclaimed. Her hair was very untidy; she was a little fluffy-looking; but she was very much younger than he was and really glad to see him, he thought; yes; here was his private life; here was the place where he felt at home. The little dog bounced up at her. He felt completely at ease with her, they had all sorts of little games and jokes together.

"Lulu, Lulu," she cried, catching the little dog in one hand while she put the other to her hair, "come and let Uncle Bogy look at you."

The Colonel had settled himself in the creaking basket-chair. She put the dog on his knee. There was a red patch—possibly eczema—behind one of its ears. The Colonel put on his glasses and bent down to look at the dog's ear. Mira kissed him where his collar met his neck. Then his glasses fell off. She snatched them and put them on the dog. The old boy was out of spirits today, she felt. In that mysterious world of clubs and family life of which he never spoke to her some-

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thing was wrong. He had come much too early; before she had done her hair, which was a nuisance. But her duty was to distract him. So she flitted—her figure, enlarging as it was, still allowed her to glide between table and chair—hither and thither; removed the firescreen and set a light, before he could stop her, to the grudging lodging-house fire. Then she perched on the arm of his chair.

"Oh, Mira!" she said, glancing at herself in the looking-glass and shifting her hair-pins, "what a dreadfully untidy girl you are!" She loosed a long coil and let it fall over her shoulders. It was beautiful gold glancing hair still, though she was nearing forty and had, if the truth were known, a daughter of eight boarded out with friends at Bedford. The hair began to fall of its own accord, of its own weight, and Boggy stooped and kissed her hair. A barrel-organ had begun to play down the street and the children all rushed in that direction, leaving a sudden silence. The Colonel began to stroke her neck. He began fumbling, with the hand that had lost two fingers, rather lower down where the neck joins the shoulders. Mira slipped onto the floor and leant her back against his knee.

Then there was a creaking on the stairs; someone tapped as if to warn them of her presence. Mira at once pinned her hair together; the Colonel sat upright. The door opened a chink; Mrs Sims wheezed out something that was unintelligible to the Colonel; but signified to Mira that she was wanted. She got up and shut the door firmly behind her.

The Colonel began in his methodical way to examine the dog's ears again. He knew a good deal about dogs' ears; was it eczema? or was it not eczema? He looked at the red patch, then set the dog on its legs in the basket and waited. He did not like the prolonged whispering on the landing outside. Was it Mrs Sims, or was there somebody else there? At length Mira came back; she looked worried; and when she looked worried she looked old. She began hunting about under cushions and covers. She wanted her bag, she said; where had she put her bag? In that litter of things, the Colonel thought, it might be anywhere. It was a lean, poverty stricken looking bag when she found it under the cushions in the corner of the sofa. She turned it upside down. Pocket handkerchiefs, screwed up bits of paper, silver and coppers fell out as she shook it. But there should have been a sovereign, she said. "I'm sure I had one yesterday," she murmured.

"How much?" said the Colonel.

It came to one pound—no, it came to one pound eight and sixpence she said, muttering something about the washing. The Colonel slipped two sovereigns out of his little gold case and gave them to her. She took them and there was more whispering on the landing.

"Washing . . ." thought the Colonel, looking round the room. It was a dingy little hole; he felt that there were things stuffed away under cushions everywhere: but being so much older than she was it did not do to ask questions about the washing. Here she was again. She flitted across the room and sat on the floor and put her head against his knee. The grudging fire which had been flickering feebly had died down now. "Let it be," he said impatiently, as she took up the poker. "Let it go out." She resigned the poker. The dog, curled up in its basket, snored. His hand began its voyage up and down her neck, in and out of the long

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thick hair. In this small room, so close to the other houses, dusk came quickly; and the curtains were half drawn. He drew her to him; he kissed her on the nape of the neck; she snuggled against him. There were two hours, or at any rate one hour and a half, he calculated, before he need go back again to his home in Abercorn Terrace, and he kissed her again.

"It's not boiling," said Milly Pargiter, looking at the tea-kettle. She was sitting at the round table in the front drawing-room of the house in Abercorn Terrace. "Not nearly boiling," she repeated. The kettle was an old-fashioned brass kettle, chased with a design of roses that was almost obliterated. A feeble little flame flickered up and down beneath the brass bowl. Her sister Delia, lying back in a chair beside her, watched it too. "Must a kettle boil?" she asked idly after a moment, as if she expected no answer, and Milly did not answer. They sat in silence watching the little flame on a tuft of yellow wick. There were many plates and cups as if other people were coming in; but at the moment they were alone. The room was full of furniture. Opposite them stood a Dutch cabinet with blue china on the shelves; the sun of the April evening made a bright stain here and there on the glass. Over the fireplace the portrait of a red-haired young woman in white muslin holding a basket of flowers on her lap smiled down on them. In the further room was a piano, and beyond, a garden where the trees were beginning to show green buds; but the farther room was in shadow.

"I hate that kettle," said Delia viciously, at last.

Here the parlourmaid came in with a dish of hot cakes. She glanced at the kettle as she set them down.

"I'll boil it on the kitchen fire if you like, Miss," she said.

"No thanks, Crosby," said Milly. "It'll boil in time. . . . And everybody's always so late," she added.

She took a hair-pin from her head as Crosby shut the door, and began fraying the wick into separate strands so as to increase the size of the flame.

"That doesn't do any good," said Delia irritably.

But after a minute or two a faint singing sound, like the plaint of a gnat, issued dimly.

"What a time it all takes!" Delia sighed, fidgeting in her chair restlessly, as they sat listening. Then she said: "Now she says Nurse steals the sugar"—she was referring to her mother who was an invalid. "She can see her shadow on the wall."

"The new one came this afternoon," said Milly. "She's sandy; she's Scotch." She took out her hairpin again and applied it to the wick.

"Why must nurses always bring such enormous—" Delia began. Here the door burst open and in rushed a little girl in a stiff pink frock and pinafore. She stood looking round her as if she thought she was late. She left the door open behind her.

"Do learn to shut the door after you," said Milly.

"And I think Nurse might have put you on a clean pinafore," she added. There was a green smudge on Rose's white pinafore, as if she had been climbing a tree.

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"It hadn't come back from the wash," said Rose, the little girl, grumpily. She came and sat down on the edge of a chair and looked from thing to thing on the table. But there was no question of tea yet.

Milly applied her hair-pin to the wick again. Delia leant back and looked over her shoulder out of the window. From where she sat she could see the front door steps.

"Now there's Martin," she said gloomily. The door slammed; books were slapped down on the hall table, and Martin, a boy of twelve or thirteen, came in. He had the red hair of the woman in the picture, but it was rumpled.

"Go and make yourself tidy," said Delia severely. "You've plenty of time," she added. "The kettle isn't nearly boiling yet."

They all looked at the kettle. It still kept up its faint melancholy singing as the little flame flickered under the swinging bowl of brass.

"Blast that kettle," said Martin, turning sharply away.

"Mama wouldn't like you to use language like that," Milly reproved him as if in imitation of an older person; for their mother had been ill so long that both sisters had taken to imitating her manner with the children. The door opened again.

"The tray, Miss . . ." said Crosby, keeping the door open with her foot. She had an invalid's tray in her hands.

"The tray," said Milly. "Now who's going to take up the tray?" Again she imitated the manner of an older person who wishes to be tactful with children.

"Not you, Rose. It's too heavy. Let Martin carry it; and you can go with him. But don't stay. Just tell Mama what you've been doing; and then come down; and the kettle . . . the kettle . . ."—here she applied herself to the wick again with her hair-pin—"the kettle will—" She stopped. The door shut.

"Chasing Miss Pym's cats again," said Delia, as the children shut the door. "Martin and Rose."

"Yes," said Milly. "Elanor had another note this morning. She says . . ." But their eyes were drawn to the kettle. A thin puff of smoke was issuing from the serpent-shaped spout. At first intermittent, it gradually became more and more powerful until, just as they heard steps on the stairs, a long and steady current of steam issued in one volume from the spout.

"It's boiling!" Milly exclaimed, as Rose and Martin came in. She lifted the lid and looked in.

"It's boiling!" she exclaimed, and began to make the tea.

The children were helped first and they ate in silence. The sun seemed to be going in and out, to judge from the changing lights, on the glass of the Dutch cabinet. Sometimes a bowl shone deep blue; then it turned livid. Lights rested fitfully upon the carpet in the further room, as if considering here one spot, there another. The children were very hungry; Martin especially bolted his food.

"Cake comes after bread and butter," said Milly firmly, but she decided to say nothing about Miss Pym's cats until tea was over.

"And don't eat all the hot cakes," she added, as Martin lifted the lid off. "There's Elanor, remember."

As she spoke the hall door slammed. The sisters looked at each other. Could it be Elanor already? Then

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a stick grated in the hall. They knew who it was; it was not Elanor.

"It's Papa!" Milly exclaimed warningly.

Instantly Martin wriggled out of his father's armchair. Delia sat upright. Milly at once moved forward a very large rose-sprinkled cup that did not match the rest. They had not expected him; but here he was. The Colonel stood at the door and surveyed the group rather fiercely. His small blue eyes looked round them as if to find fault; at the moment there was no particular fault to find, but he was out of temper; they knew at once before he spoke that he was in one of his worst moods.

"Grubby little ruffian," he said, pinching Rose by the ear as he passed her. She put her hand at once over the stain on her pinafore.

"Mama all right?" he said, letting himself down in one solid mass into the big armchair. He detested tea; but he always sipped a little from the huge old cup that had been his father's. He raised it and sipped perfunctorily.

"And what have you all been up to?" he asked.

He looked round him with the smoky but shrewd gaze that could be genial, but was surly now.

"Delia had her music lesson, and I went to Whiteleys—" Milly began, rather as if she were a child reciting a lesson.

"Spending money, eh?" said her father sharply, but not unkindly.

"No, Papa; I told you. They sent the wrong sheets, and I took them back and told them—"

"And you, Martin?" Colonel Pargiter asked, cutting short his daughter's statement. "Bottom of the class as usual?" he asked.

"Top!" shouted Martin, bolting the word out as if he had restrained it with difficulty until this moment.

"Hm—you don't say so," said his father. His gloom relaxed a little. He put his hand into his trouser pocket and brought out a handful of silver. His children watched him as he tried to single out one sixpence from all the florins. He had lost two fingers of the right hand in the Mutiny, and the muscles had shrunk so that the right hand resembled the claw of some aged bird. But the left hand by contrast was large, firm and hairy. He shuffled and fumbled; but as he always ignored the injury, his children dared not help him. The fumbling with the coins went on clumsily for some time; Rose could not take her eyes off her father's hand; the shiny knobs of the mutilated fingers always fascinated her.

"Here you are, Martin," he said at length, handing the sixpence to his son. Then he sipped his tea again and wiped his moustaches.

"Where's Elanor?" he said at last, as if to break the silence.

"It's her Grove day," Milly reminded him.

"Oh, her Grove day," muttered the Colonel. He stirred the sugar round and round in the cup as if to demolish it.

"The dear old Levys," said Delia tentatively. She was his favourite daughter; but she felt uncertain in his present mood how much she could venture.

He said nothing.

"Bertie Levy's got six toes on one foot," Rose piped up suddenly. The others laughed. But the Colonel cut them short.

"You hurry up and get off to your prep., my boy,"

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he said, glancing at Martin, who was still eating.

"Let him finish his tea, Papa," said Milly, again imitating the manner of an older person.

"And the new nurse?" the Colonel asked, drumming on the edge of the table. "Has she come?"

"Yes. She came this afternoon," Milly began.

Here, much to their relief, there was the sound of a key in the door; the sisters looked up; they hoped that it might be Elanor. They could hear a rustling in the hall. Yes, it was Elanor. She came in as if she were late. She had her hands full of things. She glanced round quickly and made a little exclamation on seeing her father; then began pulling off her gloves and dropped her bag on a table. There was something random yet competent about her; she had an air of responsibility as if she were the eldest. She was about twenty-two.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said. "I got kept. And I didn't expect—" She looked at her father.

"I got off earlier than I thought," he said hastily. "The meeting—" he stopped short. In fact there had been another row. He had marched off in a rage.

"And how's your Grove, eh?" he added.

From the way he said "your Grove" it was clear that he humoured Elanor's hobby. There was something congenial to him in his eldest daughter: she was bright-eyed and healthy-looking, though not a beauty.

"Oh, my Grove—" she repeated; but Milly interrupted.

"There's still some left," she said, handing her the covered dish.

"I got kept," Elanor said again, helping herself. She began to eat; the atmosphere lightened.

"Now tell us Papa," said Delia boldly—she was his favourite daughter—"what you've been doing with yourself. Had any adventures?"

The remark was unfortunate.

"There aren't any adventures for an old foggy like me," said the Colonel surlily. They supposed that he referred to his chronic grievance, with "that confounded gang" again, and Delia was sorry she had spoken. He ground the grains of sugar against the walls of his cup. Then he seemed to repent of his gruffness; he pondered for a moment, and said:

"I met old Burke at the Club; asked me to bring one of you to dinner; Robin's back, on leave."

He drank up his tea. Some drops fell on his little pointed beard. He took out his large silk handkerchief and wiped his chin impatiently. Elanor, sitting on her low chair, saw a curious look first on Milly's face, then on Delia's. It was alert; intent; in some way it was slightly disagreeable. She had an impression of hostility between them. But nothing was said. Delia took another slice of bread and butter; they went on eating and drinking until the Colonel took up his cup, saw there was nothing in it, and put it down firmly with a little chink. That was the signal that the ceremony of tea-drinking was over.

"Now, my boy, take yourself off and get on with your prep.," he said to Martin.

Martin withdrew the hand that was stretched towards a plate.

"Cut along," said the Colonel imperiously. Martin got up and went, drawing his hand reluctantly along the chairs and tables as if to delay his passage. He slammed the door rather sharply behind him. The Colonel rose and stood upright among them in his

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tightly-buttoned coat frock.

"And I must be off too," he said. But he paused a moment, as if there was nothing particular for him to be off to. He stood for a moment very erect among them, as if he wished to give some order, but could not at the moment think of any order to give. Then he recollected.

"I wish one of you would remember," he said, addressing his daughters impartially, "to write to Edward. . . . Tell him to write to Mama."

"Yes," said Elanor.

He moved towards the door. But he stopped.

"And let me know when mama wants to see me," he remarked. Then he paused and pinched his youngest daughter by the ear.

"Grubby little ruffian," he said, pointing to the green stain on her pinafore. She at once covered it with her hand. At the door he paused again.

"Don't forget," he said, fumbling with the handle, "don't forget to write to Edward." At last he had turned the handle and was gone.

They all relaxed immediately that he had left the room. Elanor stretched out and poured herself out another cup of tea. Milly cut herself a slice of cake. But they were silent. There was something strained in the atmosphere Elanor felt; some hidden discomfort. She took a little pile of books out of the bag that she had dropped on the table and laid one open on her knee. But she did not look at it; her glance fixed itself rather absentmindedly on the further room. The trees were coming out in the back garden; there were little leaves—little ear-shaped pointed leaves on the bushes. The sun was shining.

"Elanor," said Rose in a low voice, standing beside her sister. She was a sturdy little girl; she held herself in a way that was oddly like her father's. "Elanor," she repeated, for her sister was not attending to her.

"Well?" said Elanor, looking at her.

"I want to go to Lamleys," said Rose, speaking in a very low voice but with determination.

"Oh it's too late for Lamleys," said Elanor, rousing herself. "Wait till tomorrow, Rose." She looked past her at the trees. Rose set her lips firmly. Again she looked the image of her father, standing there—determined, military—with her hands behind her back.

"What's that stain on your pinafore?" said Elanor, looking at her.

"They don't shut till seven," said Rose.

"Probably she had had a very dull day," Elanor thought.

"Well then, ask Martin to go with you," she said.

The little girl moved off slowly towards the door. Elanor took up her account-books again.

"But you're not to go alone, Rose; you're not to go alone," she said, looking up over them as Rose reached the door. Nodding her head in silence, Rose disappeared.

Elanor leant back in her chair. How large the rooms looked and how full of furniture after Mrs Levey's bedroom in Auburn Grove! she was thinking. The sun was on the trees again in the back garden. The buds were beginning to swell. The spring light of course showed up the shabbiness of the chair-covers. The large armchair had a dark stain on it where her father

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had rested his head, she noticed. But what a number of chairs there were—how roomy, how airy it was after that bedroom where old Mrs Levy— But she was prevented from thinking about Mrs Levy by some tension round her. Milly and Delia were both silent. Of course, it was the question of the dinner-party, she remembered. Which of them was to go? They both wanted to go. She wished people would not say, "Bring one of your daughters." She wished they would say, "Bring Elanor, or Milly or Delia," instead of lumping them all together. Then there could be no question.

"Well," said Delia abruptly, "I shall . . ."

She got up as if she were going somewhere. But she stopped. Then she went to the piano in the back room and took the fiddle that lay on the piano, wrapped it in its red silk scarf and put it back in its case. She shut the piano and put the music-books in a rack. They watched her in silence. Then she strolled over to the window that looked out onto the street.

Abercorn Terrace was a broad street of large pale houses. The houses opposite all had the same little front gardens; the same steps; the same pillars; the same bow windows. But now dusk was falling and they looked spectral and insubstantial in the dim light. Lamps were being lit; a light glowed in the drawing-room opposite; then the curtains were drawn, and the room was blotted out. Delia stood looking at the street. A woman of the lower classes was wheeling a perambulator; an old man tottered along with his hands behind his back. Then the street was empty. There was a pause. Here came a hansom jingling down the road. Delia was momentarily interested. Was it going to stop at their door or not? It seemed so. She gazed more intently. But then, to her regret, the cabman jerked his reins, the horse stumbled on; the cab stopped next door but one.

"Someone's calling on the Stapletons," she said over her shoulder, holding apart the muslin blind. Milly came and stood beside her sister, and together, through the slit, they watched a young man in a top-hat get out of the cab. He stretched his hand up to pay the driver.

"Don't be caught looking," said Elanor warningly. The young man ran up the steps into the house; the door shut upon him and the cab drove away.

But for the moment the two girls stood at the window looking into the street. The crocuses were pricking up in the front gardens. The almond trees and privets were tipped with green. A sudden gust of wind tore down the street, blowing a piece of paper along the pavement; and a little swirl of dry dust followed. Above the roofs was one of those red and fitful London sunsets that make window after window burn gold. There was a wildness in the spring evening, even here, in Abercorn Terrace. The light was changing from gold to black, from black to gold. Dropping the blind, Delia turned, and coming back into the drawing-room, said suddenly:

"Oh my God!"

Elanor, who had taken up her books again, looked up disturbed.

"Eight times eight . . ." she said aloud. "What's eight times eight?"

Putting her finger on the page to mark the place, she looked at her sister. As she stood there with her

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head thrown back and her hair red in the sunset glow, she looked for a moment defiant and beautiful. All the beauty of the family was hers, not Milly's, who was mouse-coloured and nondescript.

"Look here, Delia," said Elanor, shutting her book, "you've only got to wait . . ." She could not say in so many words "until Mama dies," but that was what she meant.

"No, no, no," said Delia, stretching her arms out. "It's hopeless. . . . There's all Edward's bills—" she began. But she broke off, for Crosby had come in. She was carrying a tray. One by one with an exasperating little chink she put the cups, the plates, the knives, the jam-pots, the dishes of cake and the dishes of bread and butter, on the tray. Then, balancing it carefully in front of her, she went out. Then there was a pause. In she came again and folded the table-cloth and moved the tables. There was a pause. A moment or two later back she came carrying two silk-shaded lamps. She set one in the front room, one in the back room. Then she went, creaking in her cheap shoes, to the window and drew the curtains. They slid with a familiar click along the brass rod, and soon the windows were obscured by thick sculptured folds of claret-coloured plush. When she had drawn the curtains in both rooms, a profound silence seemed to fall upon the drawing-room. The world outside seemed thickly and entirely cut off. Far away down the next street they heard the voice of a street hawker droning up and down. The heavy hooves of van horses clopped slowly down the road. For a moment, wheels ground on the road; then they died away and the silence was complete.

Two yellow circles of light fell under the lamps. Elanor drew her chair up under one of them, bent her head and went on with the part of her work that she always left to the last because she disliked it so much—adding up figures. Her lips moved and her pencil made little dots on the paper as she added eights and sixes and fives and fours.

"There!" she said at last. "That's done. Now I'll go and sit with Mama."

She stooped to pick up her gloves.

"But Elanor," said Milly, throwing aside a magazine she had opened, "you've been out all day. I'll go and sit with Mama. Or Papa—he said he would."

"He fidgets her so," said Elanor. "I'll go. I only saw her for a moment this morning."

Delia suddenly emerged from the back room in which she had been prowling.

"I've nothing whatever to do," she said briefly. "I may just as well go."

Her manner was not gracious, but she always meant what she said, and they let her go.

"She did get an hour's practising this afternoon," said Milly rather guiltily as her sister went. It was so seldom that she got a chance of talking to Elanor alone; and she had a younger sister's doglike devotion. She drew her chair up. But Elanor did not want to talk. She felt tired; she felt distracted. She sat silent, looking at the fire. It was absurd to have a fire like that at this time of year, she thought. Crosby had piled great lumps of coal on it, so that it should last the whole evening. It was not burning properly yet. A little flame sucked at the side of the coal, and a yellowish plume of smoke rose rather sullenly. She took up the tongs.

"Well," she said perfunctorily, picking a lump of

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coal off, "how's Mama been today?"

"Oh, much as usual," said Milly, stretching her arms above her head. "Rather worried. It's the sugar today. She can see Nurse stealing it—her shadow on the wall."

Delia went upstairs, step by step, very slowly. When she came to the bedroom door with the jugs and glasses on the table outside, she paused. She could not force herself to go in. Through the little window at the end of the passage she could see flamingo-coloured curls of cloud lying on a pale-blue sky. After the dusk of the drawing-room, her eyes dazzled. She seemed fixed there for a moment by the light. Then on the floor above she heard children's voices—Martin and Rose quarrelling.

"All right then—don't!" she heard Rose say.

Ought she to go and stop them? A door slammed; there was silence. It was no use waiting any longer. She drew in a deep breath as if she were taking in a provision of fresh air to last her through the visit and tapped at the sick-room door. The nurse rose very quietly from her seat and put her finger to her lips; Mrs Pargiter was asleep, she signified. Delia sat down as quietly as possible beside the great brass bed. It was better if her mother was asleep; then she could sit there without talking.

She looked at her mother. She was asleep. But she slept uneasily. Lying in a cleft of the pillows with one hand under her cheek, Mrs Pargiter moaned slightly, as if she wandered in a world where, even in sleep, tiresome little obstacles lay across her path. Her face was pouched and heavy; the skin was stained with brown patches; the hair which had been red was now white, save that there were queer yellow patches in it, as if some locks had been dipped in the yolk of an egg. Bare of all rings save her wedding ring, her fingers alone seemed to indicate that she had entered the private world of illness. But she did not look as if she were dying; she looked as if she might go on existing in this borderland between life and death for ever. Delia could see no change in her. There was nothing for her to do but to sit in the chair by the bed and look at her. No book or paper was within her reach. She dared not move either, lest her mother might wake. And yet she could scarcely sit still; partly because of the sunset light in the sky everything seemed to be at full tide in her, at high pressure. A long narrow glass by the bedside reflected a section of the sky. It was dazzled at the moment with red light; it reflected also a roof and some trees. The dressing table was illuminated. The light struck on silver bottles and on glass bottles, all set out in the perfect order of things that are not used. At this hour of the evening the sick-room had an unreal cleanliness, quiet and order. There by the bedside was a little table set with spectacles, prayer-book and a vase of lilies of the valley. The flowers, too, looked unreal.

She did not dare to move, or the chair might creak. She clasped her hands round her knees to bind herself to stillness. There was nothing to do but to look; and she had looked a thousand times at everything already. There was the yellow drawing of her grandfather with the high lights on his nose and forehead; there was the faded photograph of Uncle Horace in his uniform;

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there was the crucifix hanging rather to the right. She stared at the lean, twisted figure that was nailed to it.

"But you don't believe in it!" she said savagely, looking at her mother sunk in sleep. "You don't want to die."

She often found herself speaking bitterly to her mother as she sat beside her. It shocked her. The others—her brothers and sisters—she was certain never did. But she could not help it. She moved restlessly; the chair creaked; her mother turned slightly, as if she had met another obstacle in her passage. It would be dreadful if she woke, Delia thought; then the eternal questions would begin. Has Edward written? ... What's Papa doing? ... and so on. She forced herself to sit perfectly still, until her mother seemed to sink a little deeper into that puzzling world which gave her neither rest nor satisfaction it seemed, for she sighed heavily as she turned over in bed. Delia tried to pity her, lying there with no more life to come. "But you've had your life," she thought savagely, "and I'm only nineteen. She tried to whip up some feeling such as the others had—of love; of sorrow; but as if to spite her she could only remember unpleasant memories; nagging scenes; how she had been snubbed and scolded.

"She always scolded me," she thought, looking at the brown puckered face in which the lines had only been softened, not removed. Still—there was the summer at Sidmouth, she tried to remember.

"And there were some steps in the garden; and she called me to come to her, and told me to kiss her."

The scene melted as she tried to look at it. What then was she to think of?

The figure of a man in a frock-coat with a white flower in his button-hole appeared before her eyes involuntarily. She shut it off. She had sworn not to think of that till bedtime. She looked at the flowers; at the prayer-book. The sun had gone in. The long looking-glass now reflected only a dim slice of sky; it was growing dusk. She could not hold out any longer.

"... wearing a white flower in his button-hole," she began. Half shutting her eyes, she surrendered herself to the curiously luxurious sensation of rigging up a scene in which all the interest centred upon herself.

"Wearing a white flower in his button-hole," she began. It required a few minutes' preparation. She had to get some details right; there must be a hall; banks of palms; a floor beneath them crowded with people's heads: yes, she had got that. She became permeated with delicious starts of flattering and exciting emotion. The charm was beginning to work. She was on the platform; there was a huge audience; everybody was shouting, waving handkerchiefs, hissing and whistling. Then she stood up. She rose all in white in the middle of the platform; Mr Parnell was by her side.

"I am speaking in the cause of Liberty," she began, throwing out her hands, "in the cause of Justice. ... They were standing side by side. He was very pale but his dark eyes glowed. He turned to her and whispered. ...

There was a sudden interruption. Mrs Pargiter had raised herself on her pillows.

"Where am I?" she cried. She was frightened and bewildered, as she often was on waking. She raised her hand; she seemed to appeal for help; she did not know where she was. "Where am I?" she repeated. For a moment Delia was bewildered too. Where was she?

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"Here, Mama! Here!" she said rather wildly. "Here, in your own room."

She laid her hand on the counterpane. Mrs Pargiter clutched it nervously. She looked round the room as if she were seeking someone. She did not seem to recognise her daughter.

"What's happening?" she said. "Where am I?" Then looked at Delia and remembered.

"Oh, Delia—I was dreaming," she murmured half apologetically. She lay for a moment looking out of the window. The lamps were being lit, and a sudden soft spurt of light came in the street outside.

"It's been a fine day ... " she hesitated, "for ... " It seemed as if she could not remember what for.

"A lovely day, yes, Mama," Delia repeated with mechanical cheerfulness.

"... for ... " her mother tried again.

What day was it? Delia could not remember.

"... for your Uncle Digby's birthday." Mrs Pargiter at last brought out.

"Tell him from me—tell him how very glad I am."

"I'll tell him," said Delia. She had forgotten her uncle's birthday; but her mother was punctilious about such things.

"Aunt Eugénie—" she began.

But her mother was staring at the dressing-table. Some gleam from the lamp outside made the white cloth look extremely white.

"Another clean table-cloth!" Mrs Pargiter murmured peevishly. "The expense, Delia, the expense—that's what worries me—"

"That's all right, Mama," said Delia dully. Her eyes were fixed upon her grandfather's portrait; she wondered why the artist had put a dab of white chalk on his nose.

"And where was Papa lunching today?" said Mrs Pargiter. The questions, the innumerable, the intolerable questions, had begun again. Delia answered her. "And Elanor?" That was answered too.

Then she would ask if Edward had written.

"Shall I read you *The Times*, Mama?" Delia asked, to prevent further questions. But Mrs Pargiter did not want to have *The Times* read to her. She had long ceased to take any interest in the news. Delia beat about desperately for something to say.

"Aunt Eugénie brought you some flowers," she said. "Shall I go and get them?"

For some reason Mrs Pargiter seemed pleased. Her eyes rested contemplatively on the clean table-cloth that had suggested the washing bill a moment before.

"Aunt Eugénie ... " she said. "How well I remember," her voice seemed to get fuller and rounder, "the day that engagement was announced. We were all of us in the garden; there came a letter." She paused. "There came a letter," she repeated. Then she said no more for a time. She seemed to be going over some memory.

"The dear little boy died, but save for that ... " She stopped again. She seemed weaker tonight, Delia thought; and for all she could do to stop it, a start of joy ran through her. Her sentences were more broken than usual. What little boy had died? She began counting the twists on the counterpane as she waited for her mother to speak.

"You know all the cousins used to come together in the summer," her mother suddenly resumed. "There

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was your Uncle Horace. ... "

"I remember. The one whose picture is above the bed, with the glass eye," said Delia.

"Yes. He hurt his eye on the rocking-horse. The aunts thought so much of Horace. They would say ... " Here there was a long pause. She seemed to be fumbling to find the exact words.

"When Horace comes, remember to ask him about the dining-room door."

A curious amusement seemed to fill Mrs Pargiter. She actually laughed, for the first time for weeks. She must be thinking of some long-past family joke, Delia supposed, as she watched the smile flicker and fade away. Then her mother lay with her eyes shut; the hand with the single ring, the white and wasted hand, lay on the counterpane. There was complete silence, so that they could hear the clicking in the grate and a street hawker droning down the road. Mrs Pargiter said no more. She lay perfectly quiet. Then she sighed profoundly.

Mercifully the door opened and the nurse came in. Delia rose. She stooped and kissed her mother as she went out. For a moment the passage outside and the jugs and tumblers on the table looked strange. "When Horace comes, remember to ask him about the dining-room door," she said, staring at the jugs and tumblers on the little table outside.

Where am I? she wondered as she stood there. For a moment she seemed to be in some borderland between life and death. Then she heard the front door click, and she turned and went upstairs.

"Here you are, Rosie," said Nurse, looking up from the wheel of the sewing-machine as Rose came in.

The nursery was brightly lit; there was an unshaded lamp on the table. Mrs C., who came every week with the washing, was sitting in the armchair with a cup in her hand. "Go and get your sewing, there's a good girl," said Nurse as Rose shook hands with Mrs C., "or you'll never be done in time for Papa's birthday," she added, clearing a space on the nursery table.

Rose opened the table drawer and took out the boot-bag that she was embroidering with a design of blue and red flowers for her father's birthday. There were still several clusters of little pencilled roses waiting to be worked. She spread it out on the table and examined it as Nurse resumed what she was saying to Mrs C. about Mrs Kirby's daughter. But Rose did not listen.

Then I shall go by myself, she decided, straightening out the boot-bag. If Martin won't come with me, then I shall go by myself. Her mind was made up. She turned and said aloud:

"I left my work-box in the drawing-room."

"Well, then, go and fetch it," said Nurse, but she was not attending; she wanted to go on with what she was saying:

"... and I said to her," she went on, pausing with her hand on the wheel of the sewing-machine, "just as I might say it to you ... " but Rose shut the door.

Now the adventure has begun, she said to herself as she stole on tiptoe to the night nursery. But what story should she tell herself about going to Lamley's? About Red Indians, she decided, as she went into the night nursery. She found the matches and lit a candle. Now

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she must provide herself with ammunition and provisions; she must steal Nurse's latchkey; but where was it? Every night it was hidden in a new place for fear of burglars. She opened drawer after drawer; it would be either under the handkerchief-case or in the little box where she kept her mother's gold watch-chain. There it was. Now she had her pistol and her shot, she thought, taking her own purse from her own drawer, and enough provisions, she thought, as she hung her hat and coat over her arm, to last a fortnight.

She stole past the nursery, down the stairs. She listened intently as she passed the school-room door. She must be careful not to tread on a dry branch, or to let any twig crack under her, she told herself as she went on tiptoe. Again she stopped and listened as she passed her mother's bedroom door. Then she stood for a moment on the landing, looking down into the hall. The dog was asleep on the mat; the coast was clear; the hall was empty. She heard voices in the drawing-room.

She turned the latch of the front door with extreme gentleness, and closed it with scarcely a click behind her until she was round the corner; she crouched close to the wall so that nobody could see her from the drawing-room window. When she reached the corner under the laburnum tree she stood erect.

"I am Pargiter of Pargiter's Horse," she said, flourishing her hand, "riding to the rescue."

She had changed the story; this was a better one. She was riding by night on a desperate mission to a besieged garrison, she told herself. She had a secret message—she clenched her fist on her purse—to deliver to the General in person. All their lives depended upon it. The British flag was still flying on the central tower—Lamley's shop; the General was standing on the roof with his telescope to his eye. All their lives depended upon her riding to them through the enemies' country. Here she was galloping across the desert. She began to trot. It was growing dark. The street lamps were being lit. The lamplighter was going along poking his stick up into the little trap-door. The trees in the front gardens made a wavering network of shadow on the pavement; the pavement stretched before her broad and dark. Then there was the crossing; and then there was Lamley's shop on the little island of shops opposite. She had only to cross the desert, to ford the river, and she was safe. Flourishing the arm that held the pistol, she clapped spurs to her horse and galloped down Melrose Avenue. As she ran past the pillar-box the figure of a man suddenly emerged under the gas lamp.

"The enemy!" Rose cried to herself. Bang!" she cried, pulling the trigger of her pistol and looking him full in the face as she passed him. It was a horrid face; it frightened her. He leered at her. He put out his arm as if to stop her. He almost caught her. She dashed past him. The game stopped. She became herself as she ran—a little girl who had run out without telling anyone and disobeyed her sister. She fled across the road; she was immensely relieved to see in front of her Lamley's shop, still open, still lit up, with its toys in the window. She pushed the door violently. She burst in and stood there panting. But she could not remember what she had come for.

Old Mrs Lamley, with her gold spectacles on the tip of her nose, was doing something to a pile of

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newspapers. She looked up enquiringly.

"Hullo, Rosie!" she exclaimed. "What do you want, my dear?"

She kept her hand on the pile of newspapers; she looked surprised. For a moment Rose stood there panting. She had forgotten what she had come for.

"Isn't it rather late for a little girl like you to be out alone?" Mrs Lamley asked. She stood looking at her, as if she knew that she had come out only in her house shoes without telling anybody.

"I want the box of ducks in the window," Rose said at last. Mrs Lamley looked at her again. Then she waddled round to the window and took down the box with the glass lid with the swans and ducks in it.

"Is this what you want?" she asked. She looked at her again as if there were something queer about her clothes.

Rose handed the half-crown that she was grasping in her hand. The parcel was wrapped up; and her change was counted out to her.

"Good-night, my dear, and run along home," said Mrs Lamley, giving her the parcel. Then she began folding up the newspapers again, for she was shutting up the shop.

"Good-night, Mrs Lamley," said Rose, and turned, though she wanted to stay. I gave my message to the General in person, she said to herself as she stood outside on the pavement again. And this is the trophy, she said, grasping the box under her arm. I am returning in triumph with the head of the chief rebel, she told herself, as she surveyed the stretch of Melrose Avenue before her. I must set spurs to my horse and gallop. But the story no longer worked. Melrose Avenue remained Melrose Avenue. She looked down it. There was the long stretch of bare street in front of her. The trees were trembling their shadows over the pavement. The lamps stood at great distances apart, and there were pools of darkness between. She began to trot. Suddenly as she passed the lamp-post, she saw the man again. He was leaning with his back against the lamp-post, and the light from the gas lamp flickered over his face. As she passed he sucked his lips in and out. He made a mewling noise. But he did not stretch his hands out at her; they were unbuttoning his clothes.

She fled past him. She thought that she heard him coming after her. She heard his feet padding on the pavement. Everything shook as she ran; pink and black spots danced before her eyes as she ran up the door-step, fitted her key in the latch and opened the hall door. She did not care whether she made a noise or not. She hoped somebody would come out and speak to her. She did not mind if she were scolded or not. But nobody heard her. The hall was empty. The dog was asleep on the mat. There were voices still talking in the drawing-room.

"And when it does catch," Elanor was saying, "it'll be much too hot." She had taken off one coal; but it made very little difference. The coals were all stuck together; they had caught; the fire was beginning to burn. And when it did burn it would be much too hot.

"Yes, it'll be much too hot," Milly agreed, and went on with what she was saying.

"... if we could only keep her off the present," she

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was saying; "that's what worries her..." They were talking about their mother.

Elanor laid down the tongs with which she had been moving the coals.

"... and then Edward forgetting to write," Milly added.

"That reminds me," said Elanor. She must remember to write to him. But there would be time after dinner, she thought. She did not want to write; she did not want to talk; always when she came back from the Grove she felt as if several things were going on at the same time. It distracted her; it was all such a jumble; it was all so disconnected; words went on repeating themselves in her mind—words and sights. She was thinking of old Mrs Levy, sitting propped up in bed with her white hair in a thick flop like a wig and her face cracked like an old glazed pot.

"Them that's been good to me, them remember... them that's ridden in their coaches when I was a poor widder woman scrubbing and mangling—" Here she stretched out her arm, which was wrung and white like the root of a tree. Elanor tried to get the words right: Them that's been good to me, them I remember... she repeated to herself as she looked at the fire. The man who rode in his coach was the rich brother who had gone to America... And then the daughter came in who was working for a tailor. She wore pearls as big as hen's eggs; also she had taken to painting her face. But Milly made a little movement.

"I was thinking," said Elanor on the spur of the moment, "the poor enjoy themselves more than we do."

"The Levys?" said Milly absentmindedly. Then she brightened.

"Do tell me about the Levys," she added. Elanor's relations with "the poor"—the Levys, the Grubbs, the Paravicinis, the Zwinglers and the Cobbs, always amused her family. But Elanor was sorry she had spoken. She did not like talking about "the poor" as if they were people in a book. She had a great admiration for Mrs Levy.

"Oh, they're much as usual," she said sharply. Milly looked at her. She reflected that Elanor was what they called "broody." The family joke was, "Look out. Elanor's broody. It's her Grove day." Elanor was ashamed of being irritable; but she was irritable. She always was irritable for some reason when she came back from the Grove—so many different things were going on in her head at the same time: Canning Place; Abercorn Terrace; this room; that room. It was all so disconnected. There was the old Jewess sitting up in bed in her hot little room; then one came back here, and there was Mama ill, and Papa grumpy; and Delia and Milly quarrelling about a party. It was all so silly. But she checked herself. After all, Milly had been doing the usual dull things all day long; she at any rate had been out of doors, going in and out of other people's houses. She ought to try to say something to amuse her sister.

"Mrs Levy had her rent ready, for a wonder," she said. "Lily helps her. Lily's got a job at a tailor's in Shoreditch. She came in all covered with pearls and things. They do love finery—Jews," she added.

"Jews?" said Milly. She seemed to consider the taste of the Jews; and then to dismiss it.

"Yes, Shiny," she said.

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32 "But she's extraordinarily handsome," said Elanor. Lily, the daughter, had wonderful colour, wonderful dark eyes. Milly looked at her and smiled. Elanor always will stick up for the poor, she thought, looking at her with affection. She thought her the best, the wisest, the most remarkable person she knew.

"I believe you like going there more than anything," she said. "I believe you'd like to go and live there if you had your way," she added, with a little sigh.

Elanor shifted in her chair. She had her dreams, her plans, of course; but she did not want to discuss them.

"Perhaps you will, when you're married," said Milly. There was something peevish yet plaintive in her voice, which made Elanor think of the Burkes' dinner-party. She wished Milly did not always bring the conversation back to marriage. And what do they know about it? she asked herself, thinking that she knew a great deal about marriage from hearing Mrs Levy talk. They stay at home too much, she thought; they never see anyone outside their own set. Here they are cooped up, day after day. . . . That was why she had said, "The poor enjoy themselves more than we do." It had struck her coming back into that drawing-room, with all the furniture and the flowers and the hospital nurses. . . . Again she stopped herself. She must get out of the habit of thinking of two things at the same time. She must wait till she was alone—till she was brushing her teeth at night. Her great time for thinking things out was when she brushed her teeth. But when she was with the others, she must stop herself from thinking of two things at the same time. She took the poker and struck the coal.

"Look! What a beauty!" she exclaimed. A flame danced on top of the coal, a nimble and irrelevant flame. It was the sort of flame they used to make when they were children, by throwing salt on the fire. She struck again, and a shower of sparks went up the chimney, like gold eyes. "D'you remember," she said, "how we used to play at firemen, and Morris and I set the chimney on fire?"

"And Pippy went and fetched Papa," said Milly. "Pippy was in a frightful . . ." She paused. There was a sound in the hall. The front door had shut. They listened. "There is Morris!" Milly exclaimed with annoyance. Always just as she was alone with Elanor, Morris came in. They listened. There was a little shuffling sound.

"No, that's not Morris," said Elanor with conviction.

The sound ceased. Whoever it was had gone upstairs. They were silent.

"Rose and Martin have been chasing the cats again," Milly began again.

Elanor sighed. She looked at the fire. It was burning now. Yellow smoke was curling round the coals. The sense she had had of two worlds was growing dim. One life—this life, she thought, looking past her sister at the armchair with a stain on the back—was rising over the other into its usual predominance. She must write to Edward; she must sit with her mother. She could hear the nurse moving about in the room overhead. As she moved to go up and sit with her mother, there was the sound of a key in the door. She listened. That was Morris—there was something unmistakable to her in the way he put his hat on the table; now he was hanging his coat on the hook. Now he was coming in. She looked round with a smile on her face as the door opened. Milly jumped up.

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"I'm going," she said, as he came in. She was jealous of their affection. Always as soon as she was alone with Elanor, Morris came and interrupted them.

He tried to stop her.

"Don't go," he said, feeling a little uncomfortable as he came in, and his sister got up at once. "Just as I come in."

"Yes, I'm going," she said. "I'm going to have a bath," she added on the spur of the moment, and left them.

Morris sank down into the chair that Milly had left. He was glad to be alone with Elanor, even though he felt that he had interrupted them.

"Weren't you talking?" he said.

"Oh, only about the usual things," said Elanor.

"Miss Pym's cats," she added. "The children have been chasing them."

She relaxed with the pleasure of being with him. It seemed to her that he had come in from the open air with a coldness, a freshness about him, from impersonal things, from the streets and the Law Courts.

Neither of them spoke. He stretched out his hands towards the fire. They were glad to be alone together. Then he asked the usual question.

"How's Mama?"

She told him; there was no change; there might be no change for a long time, she said. He wrinkled his forehead. He was losing his boyish look, Elanor thought. He was beginning to look a little jaded. It was the strain, of course—the strain that they all felt; but it was also his work. That was the worst of the Bar, everyone said; one had to wait. He was devilling for Sanders Curry; and it was dreary work, hanging about the Courts all day long.

"How's old Curry?" she asked—he had a temper.

"A bit liverish," said Morris grimly.

34 "And what have you been doing all day?" she asked.

"Nothing in particular," he replied.

"Still Evans v. Carter?" she asked.

"Yes," he said briefly.

"And who's going to win?" she asked.

"Carter, of course," he replied.

Why "of course" she wanted to ask. But she felt that he did not want to discuss Evans v. Carter with her. She had said something silly the other day—something that showed that she had not been attending. She muddled things up; for example, what was the difference between Common Law and the other kind of law? They sat silent for a time. They liked being together whether they talked or not.

"I suppose it may go on for some time longer like this?" he said at length, referring to their mother.

"There doesn't seem to be much change," Elanor had to admit. "Except that she sleeps more, perhaps." They watched the flame playing on the coals.

"D'you think I've been an awful fool," he asked after a pause, "about the Bar, Nell? With all this illness, and Edward and Martin to be paid for, Papa must find it a bit of a strain," he added. He wrinkled his brow up in the way that made her say to herself that he was losing his boyish look.

"Of course not," she said emphatically. Of course it would have been absurd for him to go into business

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when his passion was for the Law.

"You'll be Lord Chancellor one of these days," she said. "I'm sure of it." He shook his head, smiling.

35 "Quite sure," she said, looking at him as she used to look at him when he came back from school and Edward had all the prizes and Morris sat silent—she could see him now—bolting his food with nobody making a fuss of him. But even while she looked, a doubt came over her; she felt uneasily that she might have said the wrong thing. She had said Lord Chancellor. Ought she not to have said Lord Chief Justice? Was it Common Law or Chancery? She never could remember that sort of thing; and that was why he would not discuss Evans v. Carter with her.

She could not help feeling a little hurt. He was becoming more and more absorbed in the Law. But he was beginning to stop talking to her about it. And she never told him about the Levys either, except by way of a joke. That was the worst of growing up, she thought; they couldn't share things as they used to share them. When they met they always talked about the family; it seemed to her that they never had time to talk as they used to talk—about things in general.

Suddenly a blare of sound rang through the room. It was Crosby applying herself to the gong in the hall. She seemed to work herself up into a frenzy. It was time to dress, time to dress, time to dress, the gong blared out; they both stirred as the ripples of the gong went echoing through the drawing-room.

"Lord!" said Morris getting up and stretching himself, "there's the dressing bell!"

He got up and stood at his full height in front of the fire, stretching himself. Elanor looked at him—a young man of twenty-four, in tail coat and dark trousers, stretching his arms above his head.

That's what he'll look like when he's the father of a family, she thought suddenly. Then his arms fell.

"There's no chance of having a bath? I suppose," he said. He left the room.

Elanor got up too. She picked up her little rent-books and put them on the writing-table. It was her mother's; there was her silver candle, and the miniature of her father, and the spotted walrus with a brush in its back that Martin had given her for her last birthday.

That'll be my writing-table now, she thought, as she put her books down on it. Then she remembered that she must write to Edward. But was there time? She looked at her watch, cutting it off into sections with her finger. She hated writing; she never could write what came into her head to Edward. No, she would write after dinner. She stood for a moment looking round the room, and then she went up to dress. There was Crosby, already waiting in the hall.

Crosby stood waiting in the hall. Serve him right, she said to herself, as she stood by the dining-room door, if his soup is cold. She referred to Morris. It served him right for taking a bath with dinner on the table. But to do him justice, the Master himself was always on the stroke; and he never waited. Here they came: the Master and Miss Delia; Miss Elanor and Miss Milly; and here was Mr Morris running down the steps just in time. She shut the door. They were a handsome-looking family, she thought as she took her station beside the Master; the gentlemen in their

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white shirts and black jackets; the young ladies in their blue and pink flounced dresses. They excited her pride, just as the silver candlesticks and the silver bowl in the middle of the table made her proud. It paid for polishing, she thought as she looked at the silver on the dinner table.

The dining-room, a prosaic meat-smelling room by day, looked at its most festive in the evening. The Oriental daggers shone over the fireplace; the candles burnt yellow under their shades. There was a feeling, too, that the end of the day had been reached. The Colonel was always at his best in the evening; he enjoyed his dinner; and for some reason his gloom had vanished. He was in his jovial mood. His children's spirits rose as they noted it.

"That's a pretty frock you're wearing," he said to Delia as he sat down.

"This old one?" she said, patting the blue muslin.

She had worn it often, often before. It was a sign that he was in a good temper when he praised her frock. There was an opulence, an ease and a charm about him when he was in a good temper that she liked particularly. People always said she was like him; sometimes she was glad of it—tonight for instance. He looked so pink and clean and genial in his dinner-jacket. They became children again when he was in this mood, and were spurred on to make silly family jokes at which they all laughed for no particular reason.

"Elanor's broody," said her father, winking at them. "It's her Grove day."

Everybody laughed; Elanor had thought he was talking about Rover, the dog, when in fact he was talking about Mrs Egerton, the lady. Crosby, who was handing the soup, crinkled up her face because she wanted to laugh too. The Colonel could always make servants laugh when he chose; sometimes he made Crosby laugh so much that she had to turn away and pretend to be doing something at the sideboard.

"Oh, Mrs Egerton——" said Elanor, beginning her soup.

"Yes, Mrs Egerton," said her father, and he went on telling his story about Mrs Egerton, "whose golden hair was said by the voice of slander not to be entirely her own."

Delia liked listening to her father's stories about India. They were so crisp, and at the same time so romantic. They conveyed an atmosphere of officers dining together in mess jackets on a very hot night with a huge silver trophy in the middle of the table.

He used always to be like this when we were small, she thought. He used to jump over the bonfire on her birthday, she remembered. She watched him flicking cutlets dexterously on to plates with his left hand as he talked. There was an obstinacy about him—he would never let anyone else carve or help cutlets—that she admired. She admired his decision, his common sense. Flicking the cutlets on to plates, he went on.

"Talking of the lovely Mrs Egerton reminds me—I met a chap at the club today who was out there at the same time—did I ever tell you the story of old Badger Parkes and——"

"Miss——" said Crosby in a whisper, opening the door behind Elanor's back. She whispered a few words to Elanor privately.

"I'll come," said Elanor, getting up.

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"What's that, what's that?" said the Colonel, stopping in the middle of his sentence. Elanor left the room.

"Some message from Nurse, I think," said Milly.

The Colonel, who had just helped himself to cutlets, held his knife and fork in his hand. They all held their knives suspended. Nobody liked to go on eating.

"Well, let's get on with our dinner," said the Colonel abruptly. His face had changed; he had lost his geniality. Morris helped himself tentatively to potatoes. Then Crosby reappeared. She stood at the door, with her pale-blue eyes looking very prominent.

"What is it, Crosby? What is it?" said the Colonel.

"The Mistress, sir, taken worse, I think, sir," she said with a curious whimper in her voice. Everybody began to get up.

"You wait. I'll go and see," said Morris. They all followed him out into the hall. The Colonel was still holding his dinner napkin. Morris ran upstairs; in a moment he came down again.

"Mama's had a bad fainting fit," he said to the Colonel. "I'm going to fetch Prentice." He snatched his hat and coat and ran down the front steps. They heard him whistling for a cab. What was to be done next? They stood uncertainly in the hall.

"Finish your dinner, girls," said the Colonel peremptorily. But he paced up and down. They did not like to go back into the dining-room. Everyone wanted the others to go on with their dinner—but to be entrusted with some responsible job themselves. The Colonel had gone into the drawing-room and was marching up and down.

"I'll tell them to keep it hot," said Milly. She went along the passage to speak to the cook. But Delia remained standing in the hall. She could think of nothing to do.

"It has come," she said to herself; "it has come."

An extraordinary feeling of relief and excitement possessed her. Her father was pacing up and down from one drawing-room to the other, holding his table napkin. Delia followed him in; but she avoided him. She did not wish to meet his eyes. They were too much alike; each knew what the other was feeling. She stood at the window looking up the street. There had been a shower of rain. The street was wet; the roofs were shining. Dark clouds were moving across the sky; the branches were tossing up and down in the light of the street lamps. Something in her was tossing up and down too. Movement, adventure seemed to be approaching; to be within reach. A gulping sound behind her made her turn. It was Milly. She was standing by the mantelpiece under the picture of the white-robed girl with the flower-basket, and the tears slid slowly down her cheeks. Delia moved towards her automatically. She knew what she ought to do; she ought to go up to her and put her arms round her shoulders. But she could not do it; she felt nothing but relief and excitement; she stopped dead. Milly was actually crying, she observed; real tears were sliding down her cheeks. But Delia's eyes were dry. She turned to the window again. There was nothing to look at. The street was empty—only the branches were tossing up and down in the lamplight. The Colonel paced up and down; once he knocked against a table and said "Damn!" They heard steps moving about in the room upstairs. Milly went out and stood in the hall. Then she came back; and they all waited again. Delia turned to the window.

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At last she saw a hansom trotting down the street. Morris jumped out directly the cab stopped. Dr. Prentice followed him. He went straight upstairs and Morris joined them in the drawing-room.

"Why not finish your dinner?" the Colonel said gruffly, coming to a halt and standing upright before them.

"Oh, after he's gone," said Morris irritably.

The Colonel resumed his pacing.

"It's keeping hot," said Milly. Delia noticed how grown-up she had become, how tactful. Her part, she felt, was to keep in the background, so that nobody could see that she felt nothing. The Colonel had stopped his pacing at last, and stood with his hands behind him in front of the fire. He was pink and firm and gruff as usual; but he had a braced look as if he were holding himself ready for an emergency.

We're both acting, Delia thought to herself, stealing a glance at him (she always knew what he was feeling). But he's doing it better than I am.

She looked out of the window again. The rain was falling. When it crossed the lamplight it glanced in long strips of silver light.

"It's raining," she said in a low voice, but nobody answered her.

At last they heard footsteps on the stairs and Dr. Prentice came in. He shut the door quietly but said nothing.

"Well?" said the Colonel, facing up to him.

There was a prolonged pause.

"How d'you find her?" said the Colonel.

Dr. Prentice moved his shoulders slightly.

"She's rallied," he said. "For the moment," he added.

Delia felt as if she had received a blow. She sank down on the arm of a chair.

She's not going to die, she said to herself.

They all moved slightly; the strain was over. Dr. Prentice was talking in a low voice to her father; she could not hear his exact words, but she knew what he meant. She was not going to die tonight; she was going to live for weeks and weeks. It was all going to begin over again. Dr. Prentice was actually leaving the house, he was bowing sympathetically in her direction, he was not even coming again that night. Delia gave one look at the smiling face of the girl with the red hair.

You're not going to die, she said bitterly.

"Now we'd better get on with our dinner," said the Colonel. The front door had shut upon the doctor.

They all went back into the dining-room. Crosby brought back the cutlets. Some were half eaten; some were not yet touched. The potatoes had a hard crust on them, and one of the candles was scorching its shade. Only Elanor did not come, but Milly took her place and helped the pudding as if she were grown-up. When they had done their dinner they returned to the drawing-room again. The only sign that was left of the crisis was that the Colonel's dinner napkin still lay on the table under the lamp.

At last Elanor came in. They all looked at her.

"Mama seems to be quite comfortable now," she said. "She's fallen asleep. Nurse will ring if she wants anything."

The Colonel picked up the evening paper and began to read it. Then he threw it away.

The Years—25

"I'm going to my study," he said. He left them. But they scarcely talked. They all felt strangely tired. Long silences came between their sentences; they repeated the same things over and over again. At last Elanor rose rather wearily.

"I'll go up and see the children," she said. She always went her rounds about this time of night.

41 Rose lay huddled up under her blankets deep sunk in darkness. Then she sighed and stirred and stretched her arms out. Something had swum up on top of the blackness; she saw something in her sleep. An oval white thing dangled in front of her on the blackness; it dangled as if it were hung on a string. She half woke; she stretched and sighed. The white thing bubbled with grey spots that went in and out. She woke up completely. A face was hanging in the air quite close to her; it hung as if it dangled from a piece of string. She was terrified. She put out her hand to touch the big bed next hers. She missed it. She shut her eyes. But the face still dangled there in the darkness.

She sat up in bed. "Nurse!" she cried. "Nurse!" But nobody answered her. Groping widely with her hand, she touched the bed next hers; but it was empty. She leapt out of bed and tried to find the door. But everything seemed the wrong way round. She bumped against the corner of the chest of drawers. She groped all round the room until she found the door. She opened it, ran across the passage and burst into the day nursery opposite.

The room was blazing with light. Nurse and Mrs. C. were sitting at the table eating their supper. They had glasses of beer beside them and plates of meat. Both looked up in astonishment as she entered. Rose stood there blinking in the bright light.

"Whatever are you doing, Rosie?" Nurse asked sharply. She was angry.

42 "I had a bad dream," said Rose. "I was frightened."

"Tut, tut, tut," said Mrs. C., holding her knife and fork in her hand.

"You'll be catching your death of cold, jumping out of bed like that," said Nurse. She got up abruptly. She put down her knife and fork with a clatter.

"Whatever is there to be frightened about?" she said crossly. "Come along to bed and don't be silly." She was looking about her for the bedroom candle. She was rattling the match-box. Now she lit the candle.

"Now come along and get into bed," she said, taking up the candle. "I won't be a minute," she said over her shoulder to Mrs. C., who sat there holding her knife and fork and saying "tut—tut—tut" all the time.

"Come along and get back into bed," said Nurse, bundling her out of the day nursery and across the passage.

"I know what frightened you," she said, turning down the blankets and making Rose lie down. "It's all this romping with Martin in the back garden; that's what frightened you," she spoke sharply; she resented the interruption of her talk. She tucked the sheets firmly across the bed.

"But when are you coming to bed, Nurse?" said Rose, clutching her hand.

"Oh, I shan't be long now," said Nurse, taking the candle. "As soon as I've had my supper."

"But isn't it very late?" said Rose, still clutching her hand.

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"Now, you shut your eyes, and you'll be off in a jiffy," said Nurse, detaching her hand.

"Mayn't I have the candle left?" said Rose, as Nurse turned to go.

"Whatever d'you want a candle for, when you're going to sleep?" said Nurse. "You're never afraid of the dark, are you? And I thought you were such a brave girl." She gave a final twitch to the counterpane. "Now just turn over and go to sleep," she said.

She stood at the door, holding the candle rather aslant, so that queer shadows went wavering over the walls. Even that'll be gone in a moment, Rose thought. Next moment the door was shut; she was alone in the darkness. Still, Nurse and Mrs. C. were in the next room. She strained her ears and heard the chatter of voices and the clatter of knives upon plates. She stretched out in bed. She shut her eyes tightly. Her mother had once told her to think of a flock of sheep and count them one by one if she could not get to sleep. She made herself think of a flock of sheep, penned up in a hurdle in a field. Then she made one of the sheep leap over the hurdle; then another. She counted them as they jumped. One, two, three, four—one after another they jumped over the hurdle; but when she came to the fifth sheep it would not jump. It turned round and looked at her. Its long narrow face was grey; it bubbled; it was the face of the man at the pillar-box covered with spots that began to bubble in and out as she looked at it. She could not stop looking at it. She sat upright in bed. If she shut her eyes, the man was there; if she opened them, the man was there. The spots jumped up and down. She sat upright in bed. She was desperate. She listened. Now there was dead silence everywhere. The sound of knives and forks in the next room had ceased. She was alone in the room looking at the face. She was alone with something horrible. Then she heard a sound in the passage. It came closer and closer. She thought she heard a nose snuffling at the door. It was the man himself. His hand was on the door. He opened it. An angle of light fell across the wash-stand. The jug and basin were lit up. Someone was actually in the room—it was Elanor.

Rose at once burrowed deep down under the blankets: she pulled the sheets over her head. She heard Elanor come across the room; she was now standing by the bed. The light fell on Rose's eyelids. She opened her eyes very cautiously.

"Not asleep, Rose?" said Elanor in a very low voice. "Not quite," said Rose, turning round and pretending to yawn.

"Why are you not asleep?" said Elanor. She put down her candle and began to straighten the bed-clothes. They were all crumpled up. She looked at Rose. Her eyes were very bright and her cheeks were flushed. What was the matter? Could she have heard the doctor coming? Had they woken her, moving about downstairs in Mama's room?

"What's been keeping you awake?" she asked. Rose yawned again; but it was a sigh rather than a yawn. She could not tell Elanor what she had seen. She had a profound feeling of guilt; for some reason she must lie about the face she had seen.

"I had a bad dream," she said. "I was frightened." A queer nervous jerk ran through her body as she sat up in bed. What was the matter? Elanor wondered, again. Had she been fighting with Martin? Milly had

The Years—27

said something about chasing cats in Miss Pym's garden.

"Have you been chasing the cats again?" she asked. "Poor cats," she added, "it frightens them; they mind it just as much as you would," she said. But she knew as she said it that Rose's fright had nothing to do with the cats. She was grasping her finger tightly; she was staring ahead of her with a queer look in her eyes.

"What was the dream about?" she asked, sitting down on the edge of the bed. Rose felt that she could not tell her; she could not possibly tell her; but at all costs Elanor must be made to stay with her.

"I thought I heard a man in the room," she brought out at last. "A robber," she added.

43 "A robber? Here?" said Elanor. "But Rose, how could a robber get into your nursery? There's Papa, there's Morris—they would never let a robber come into your room."

"No," said Rose. "Papa would kill him," she added. There was something queer about her that Elanor could not understand.

"But what are you all doing?" she said restlessly. "Haven't you gone to bed yet? Isn't it very late?"

"What are we all doing?" said Elanor. "We're all sitting in the drawing-room. It's not very late." A faint sound boomed gently through the room. When the wind was in the right direction they could hear St. Paul's. There it was, striking gently. They listened; they heard the soft boom again and again, then the strokes stopped; Elanor was surprised that they stopped so soon.

"There, it's only ten o'clock, you see," she said. It had seemed to her much later. "So now you'll go to sleep." Rose clutched her hand.

"Don't go, Elanor; not just yet," Rose implored her.

"But tell me, Rose, what's frightened you?" Elanor began. Something was being hidden from her, she was sure.

"I saw . . ." Rose began, making a great effort to tell her about the man at the pillar-box; but the door opened and Nurse came in.

"I don't know what's come over Rosie tonight," she said, bustling in. She felt a little guilty; she had stayed gossiping downstairs with the other servants about the mistress.

"She sleeps so sound generally," she said, coming over to the bed.

44 "Now here's Nurse," said Elanor. "She's coming to bed. So you won't be frightened any more, will you?" She smoothed down the bed-clothes and kissed her. She got up and took her candle.

"Good-night, Nurse," she said, turning to leave the room.

"Good-night, Miss Elanor," said Nurse, putting some sympathy into her voice; for they were saying downstairs that the mistress couldn't last much longer.

"Turn over and go to sleep, dearie," she said, kissing Rose on the forehead. For she was sorry for the little girl who would so soon be motherless. Then she slipped the silver links out of her cuffs and began to take the hair-pins out of her hair, standing in her petticoats in front of the yellow chest of drawers.

"I saw," Elanor repeated, as she shut the nursery

The Years—28

door. What had Rose seen? There was something wrong—she was hiding something. But what?—she did not know. She went slowly downstairs carrying her candle. She listened at Martin's door; she heard him snoring. She went on down the next flight of stairs. She listened at her mother's door. All was still there too. She went on still further down the stairs. As she went down a weight seemed to descend on her; the weight of all the lives behind those doors. Downstairs she went; the weight increased; the whole weight of life seemed to rest on her shoulders. She paused, looking down into the hall. A blankness came over her.

What is this? Who am I? she asked herself. She could not remember where she was. She stood still, unable to move. She gazed into the bowl of water at the bottom of the stairs without seeing it.

Where am I? What am I doing? she said to herself. She seemed to be alone in the midst of nothingness. Then she saw a yellow lump of sulphur in the water; it was the dog's bowl. The dog was lying curled up at the bottom of the stairs. She stepped carefully over the body of the sleeping dog and still, without consciousness of her own identity, advancing step by step, she went into the drawing-room.

They all looked up as she came in. They all looked at her as if she might have something to tell them.

"Mama seems to be asleep still," she said. "It was all quiet." She sat down. She became gradually aware they were all sitting round the fire. Morris had a book in his hand, but he was not reading. Milly had some stuff in her hand, but she was not sewing. She herself leant back in her chair; it was only ten o'clock; it was too early to go to bed.

"Nurse will ring if she wants anything," she said. "So what about going to bed?" she added, looking at Milly and Delia. Delia was lying stretched out doing absolutely nothing.

"Oh, it's too early yet," said Milly drearily; she put a stitch into her embroidery. Elanor bethought her of her letter to Edward. She had never written it. She ought to write to Edward; but what was she to say? She went to the writing-table.

"I'll just write and tell Edward," she said. She wrote a brief, matter-of-fact letter. She licked the envelope and dabbed down the stamp.

"Shall I take it?" said Morris, dropping his book. "It'll catch the last post."

He got up as if he were glad to have something to do. Elanor went to the front door with him and stood holding it open while he went to the pillar-box. It was raining gently, and she stood at the door, breathing in the mild damp air, and watching the curious shadows that trembled on the pavement under the trees. Morris disappeared under the shadows round the corner. She remembered how she used to stand at the door when he was a small boy and went to a day school with a satchel in his hand. She used to wave to him; and when he got to the corner he turned and waved back. It was a curious little ceremony, dropped now they were both grown up. She waited; in a moment he emerged from the shadows. He came along the street and up the steps.

"He'll get that tomorrow," he said,—"anyhow by the second post."

The Years—29

He shut the door and stooped to fasten the chain. It seemed to her, as the chain rattled, that they both accepted the fact that nothing more was going to happen tonight. They avoided each other's eyes; neither of them wanted any more emotion tonight. They went back into the drawing-room.

"Well," said Elanor, looking round her, "I think I shall go to bed. Nurse will ring," she repeated for the twentieth time perhaps, "if she wants anything."

"We may as well all go," said Morris. Milly began rolling up her embroidery. Morris began raking out the fire. The lumps of coal were now firmly stuck together; they were burning brightly.

"What an absurd fire—" he began.

Suddenly a bell rang.

"Nurse!" Elanor exclaimed. She looked at Morris. She left the room hurriedly. Morris followed her.

But what's the good? Delia thought to herself. It's only another false alarm. She got up. "It's only Nurse," she said to Milly, who was standing up with a look of alarm on her face. She can't be going to cry again, she thought, and strolled off into the front room. Candles were burning on the mantelpiece. She glanced at the portrait of her mother. The girl in white seemed to be presiding over the protracted affair of her own death-bed with smiling indifference.

"You're not going to die—you're not going to die," said Delia bitterly, looking up at her. Her father, alarmed by the bell, had come into the room. He was wearing a red smoking-cap with an absurd tassel.

But it's all for nothing, Delia said silently, looking at her father. She felt that they must both check their rising excitement. "Nothing going to happen—nothing whatever," she said, looking at him. But at that moment Elanor came into the room. She was very white.

"Where's Papa?" she said, looking round. She saw him. "Come, Papa, come," she said, stretching out her hand. "Mama's dying. . . . And the children," she said to Milly over her shoulder.

Two little white patches appeared above her father's ears, Delia noticed. His eyes fixed themselves. He braced himself. He strode past them up the stairs. They all followed in a little procession behind. The dog, Delia noticed, tried to come upstairs with them; but Morris cuffed him back. The Colonel went first into the bedroom; then Elanor; then Morris; then Martin came down, pulling on a dressing-gown; then Milly brought Rose wrapped in a shawl. But Delia hung back behind the others. There were so many of them in the room that she could not get further than the doorway. She could see two nurses standing with their backs to the wall opposite. One of them was crying—the one, she observed, who had only come that afternoon. She could not see the bed from where she stood. But she could see that Morris had fallen on his knees. Ought I to kneel too, she wondered? Not in the passage, she decided. She looked away; she saw the little window at the end of the passage. Rain was falling; there was a light somewhere that made the raindrops shine. One drop after another slid down the pan; they slid and they paused; one drop joined another drop and then they slid again. There was complete silence in the bedroom, and then a murmur.

Is this death? Delia asked herself. For a moment there seemed to be something there. She listened. Now

The Years—30

there was complete silence. The raindrop paused. Then there was a stir; there was a shuffle of feet in the bedroom. Out came her father, stumbling.

"Rose!" he cried. "Rose! Rose!" He held his arms with the fists clenched out in front of him.

You did that very well, Delia told him as he passed her. It was like a scene in a play. She observed quite dispassionately that the raindrops were still falling. One sliding met another and together they both rolled to the bottom of the window-pane.

The rain fell gently, persistently, making a little chuckling and burbling noise in the gutters. Edward, leaning out of the window, could still see the trees in the college garden, whitened by the falling rain. Save for the rustle of the trees and the rain falling, it was perfectly quiet. A damp, earthy smell came up from the wet ground. Lamps were being lit here and there in the dark mass of the college; and there was a pale-yellowish mound in one corner where lamplight fell upon a flowering tree. The grass was becoming invisible, fluid, grey, like water.

He drew in a long breath of satisfaction. Of all the moments in the day he liked this best, when he stood and looked out into the garden. He breathed in again the cool damp air, and then he straightened himself and turned back into the room. It was time—no—he looked at his watch—it was almost time to get to work. He still had five minutes before he need begin again. He was working very hard. His day was parcelled out on the advice of his tutor into hours and half-hours: so many for work; so many for exercise, because he had a chance, yes, he had a very good chance old Harbottle had told his father. But he still had five minutes before he need begin. He turned up the reading-lamp. It was partly the green light that made him look a little pale and thin, but he was very handsome. With his clear-cut features and the fair hair that he brushed up with a flick of his fingers into a crest, he looked like a Greek boy on a frieze. He smiled as he turned to the table and began to arrange his books. He was thinking how, after the interview between his father and his tutor—when old Harbottle had said "Your son has a chance"—the old boy had insisted upon looking up the rooms that his own father had had, when his father was up at college. They had burst in and found a chap called Thompson on his knees blowing up the fire with a bellows.

"My father had these rooms, sir," the Colonel had said, by way of apology. The young man had got very red and said, "Don't mention it." Edward smiled. "Don't mention it," he repeated. Then he looked serious. He began moving the books on his work-table. It meant a great deal from Harbottle—"Your son has a chance"; but had he really got a chance? If he had—if he got his first, if he got his Fellowship—then it meant that he would have these rooms, this garden, this life, Oxford, for ever. He glanced round his room. It was a beautiful room, a panelled room, perfectly proportioned, so that no furniture was needed—only a few old books and a few flowers. But if he failed? The lines deepened in his forehead—it was time to begin again. He turned the lamp a little higher. When the lamp was turned up higher, he saw his work cut out in a sharp circle of bright light from the sur-

The Years—31

rounding dimness. He looked at the textbooks, at the dictionaries lying before him. He always had some doubts before he began. He was not a first-rate scholar. But it was a matter of immense importance to him that he should be successful. If he failed, he would have to leave Oxford; he would have to get a job in an office. The old boy would be frightfully cut-up if he failed. His heart was set on it. He had sent him a dozen of fine old port "by way of a stirrup-cup," as he said. But after all Marsham would be in for it; and then there was the clever little Jew-boy from Birmingham— It was time to begin. In one moment—he paused. One after another the bells of Oxford began pushing their slow chimes through the air. They tolled ponderously, unequally, as if they had to roll the air out of their way and the air was heavy. He loved the sound of the bells. He listened till the last stroke had struck; then he pulled his chair up to the table; time was up; he must work now.

A little dint sharpened between his brows. He frowned as he read. There were several weak points in his scholarship, as Harbottle had pointed out only that morning. And the little Jew-boy from Birmingham had this sort of thing at his fingers' ends. His lips—they were rather thin—met together. He looked set, strained, determined. He read; and he made a note; then he read again. All sounds were blotted out. He saw nothing but the page of Greek in front of him. But as he read, his brain gradually warmed up; he was conscious of something quickening and tightening in his forehead. His brain began to work beautifully, like a body in perfect training. He caught phrase after phrase exactly, firmly, more exactly, he noted, making a brief little note in the margin, than the night before. Little negligible words now revealed shades of meaning, which altered the meaning. He made another note; that was the meaning. His own dexterity in catching the phrase plumb in the middle gave him now and then a little thrill of excitement. There it was, clean and entire. But he forced himself to read the same passage again and again. There was nothing that Harbottle hated more than blurred edges. He must be precise; he must be exact; even his little scribbled notes—he glanced at them approvingly—must be clear as print. He turned to this book; then he turned to that book. Then he leant back and got it clear in his mind, with his eyes shut. He must let nothing dwindle off into a vague mist. All his muscles were strained. He turned the pages of his textbooks neatly and cleanly.

A dull sound boomed over him without his attending to it. It faded away. Then there was another.

"Can't be ten already?" he said. He listened. The clock went on striking. The lines that had graven themselves on his face slackened; he leant back; his muscles relaxed; he looked up from his books into the dimness. He felt as if he had thrown himself down onto the turf after running a race. But for a moment it seemed to him that he was still running; his mind went on without the book. It went on travelling by itself without impediments through a world of pure and intense meaning; yes, but gradually it lost its intensity. There were the books on the wall opposite and a photograph on the mantelpiece. The last of the ten strokes sounded. He gave a sigh and got up from the table.

The Years—32

He would have one breath of fresh air before he did another hour's reading. He went and stood by the window again, for he had left the window open. It was raining, but the whiteness had gone. It was dark in the garden outside; the trees were almost black. Save for a wet leaf shining here and there, the garden was all dark now—the yellow mound of the flowering tree had vanished. The college buildings lay round the garden in a low couched mass, here red-stained, here yellow-stained, where lights burnt behind curtains; and there lay the chapel, huddling its bulk against the sky which, because of the rain, seemed to tremble slightly. But it was no longer silent. He listened; the air was now charged with a general hum; there was no sound in particular; but, as he stood looking out, the building seemed humming with life. There was a sudden roar of laughter; then the tinkle of a piano; then a non-descript clatter and chatter—partly of china; then again the sound of rain falling, and the gutters chuckling and burbling as they sucked up the water. He turned back into the room again.

It had grown chilly; the fire was almost out. There was only a little red glow under the grey ash, but it was not worth lighting it again. Opportunely he remembered his father's gift—the wine that had come that morning. He went to the side table and poured himself out a glass of port. He smiled as he raised it against the light. He saw again his father's hand with two smooth knobs instead of fingers holding the glass, as he always held the glass, to the light before he drank.

"You can't drive a bayonet through a chap's body in cold blood," he remembered him saying.

"And you can't go in for an exam. without drinking," said Edward. He hesitated; he held the glass up to the light in imitation of his father. Then he sipped. A soft glow spread over his spine just at the nape of the neck as he drank. He set the glass on the table in front of him. He turned again to the *Antigone*. He read; then he sipped; he read on again, then he sipped again. It was comforting: the figure of the Jew-boy was not now nearly so menacing. As he read, what had been separate in his brain before seemed to mix. The wine seemed to press open little dividing doors in his brain; all stood open and lit up. He no longer made notes as he read. His eye seemed to take in whole stanzas, whole scenes at a sweep. The whole of his mind seemed to be expanded, lit up. He could almost feel the fabric of his brain rising and falling, like a yellow canopy. It was not reading; it was being. He became person after person. The figure of Antigone rose before him. He spoke with her lips. He knew before she spoke what she was about to say. She was young; she was lovely; she was like— He paused.

Oh, damn! he broke off.

Here was the old plague getting at him again. He gave the wine-glass an impatient push. He recognised the symptoms of the old plague that was coming between him and his work. It was the usual thing; he was thinking of Kitty; he was letting himself rip. It wouldn't do; it wouldn't do at all, he told himself. He pressed his pencil on the page; the point broke; he sharpened it severely; the point broke again. He entered some hieroglyphics rather scratchily in his notebook. He pushed the glass of port behind a book. It's fatal, he said to himself, when one wants to work. There was that cursed Jew-boy mugging it all up with

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a wet towel round his head. He turned to his books again. He worked on for half an hour or so doggedly; but the spring was broken; his mind no longer made any connections of its own accord; he no longer got any meaning exactly.

He looked at his watch. He had done two hours and thirty-five minutes. But it was no good; he was fagged out. He would have to stop; he would have to get up early and put in an hour before breakfast.

He began walking up and down the room. He was not thinking about the *Antigone*, although he was using the emotion that the play seemed to have brewed. He was thinking about Kitty Malone. There, through the corner of the window, he could see the Lodge. There it was, the house she lived in; a dark mass over there behind the trees; and there were lights in it; there were lights in the long lower room where they sat after dinner. They were having a party perhaps, he thought, standing at the window; or perhaps they were alone. What was she saying? Whom was she talking to? His face changed. The lines softened.

"In a white dress with a blue sash," he thought, recalling her as he had last seen her. But now, at this very moment, what was she wearing? Whom was she talking to? He walked up and down the room. As he passed the table he shut a book with an impatient brush of his hand. What was the use of trying to work? His brain felt like a dried sponge. But if he failed, he would have to leave all this. Everything—this room, this garden, Oxford, Kitty—depended on his success. And yet he could not work. His brain felt like a dried sponge. He had better go to bed. But what was the use of going to bed at this hour? He could not sleep.

He stood at the window and looked at the dull red glow over there rather low down in the dark mass. There she was standing in that long room with all the pictures; and the long room was full of people, he thought, and she was talking—

Here a blow sounded on the door—a sidelong, glancing blow, given by someone passing. He turned. He hoped that the door would open. But he heard footsteps going on up the stairs. That was Gibbs probably. That was Gibbs's way of saying that he wouldn't come in, but it was all damned nonsense mugging away over books.

"And it is all damned nonsense," Edward thought, looking at his books. He went and opened the door. Sure enough there on the stair above loomed the figure of a huge young man. He was leaning over the banisters.

"Hullo!" said Edward.

The huge young man slowly came down the stairs. He came into the room rather hesitatingly. He would have gone like a lamb if he felt Edward wanted to read; he did not want to be a nuisance, he seemed to say as he paused in the door-way. He noted the decanter and the glass on the table. Things weren't as bad as they might have been. He came right in, and while Edward went into the next room to fetch another glass, he looked with respect at the books on the table. He was not good at books himself. But what he liked about Edward was that, though he was such a clever chap, he was a good sort at bottom. Edward came back with a second glass and helped them both to wine. Beside Gibbs he looked almost small; he looked what Elanor called "finicky": she always compared Edward to

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Morris to Edward's disadvantage. He felt the contrast himself. The hand with which he lifted his glass was like a girl's beside Gibbs's great red paw. Gibbs's hand was burnt bright scarlet; it was like a piece of raw meat. He was the son of a rich man, of a manufacturer at Leeds, and sometimes set Edward's teeth on edge by the way he swilled his beer down, and some of his talk and some of his ways were a bit coarse too; but they had a great deal in common all the same. Riding was Edward's passion. The Gibbsses were in process of becoming landed gentry in Devonshire, and Gibbs's father was very generous to his son's friends.

The talk got upon hunting instantly. Edward was coming to stay at the Towers in September.

"If only this damned summer were over!" Gibbs exclaimed. There were three months of the damned summer still to run. But he had his eye upon a rather raw but handy hack that would suit Edward. He cast his eyes over his friend's light figure enviously. There was no difficulty in mounting him. "Only a young elephant will carry me," he remarked regretfully, putting his hands to his sides. He weighed twelve stone already.

"You remember that farm on the right as you go to Stapley Cross?" he was saying. "The one where the pretty girl used to be—worse luck she's married now. Well, old Storey was telling me—"

So the talk meandered on. Edward threw himself back in his chair and listened with relief. Gibbs's methods of talk were circuitous. One horse led to another horse; one run reminded him of another run; and then there were the same old stories about his wonderfully clever spaniel bitch. It was the sort of talk Edward enjoyed. And he was a hero to Gibbs, he knew. Gibbs was just launching out on another story, a story Edward seemed to know already, about how he got the better of that old ruffian Fears, when the door opened and in glided, so silently that at first they did not hear him, another young man of a very different sort from Gibbs. He was pale and small, and had bright dark eyes that looked through spectacles. Gibbs stopped in the middle of his sentence.

"Hullo, Ashley," he said rather curtly. He stretched out and poured himself another glass of the Colonel's port. Now the decanter was empty.

"Sorry," he said, glancing at Ashley.

"Don't open another bottle for me," said Ashley quickly. His voice sounded a little squeaky, as if he were ill-at-ease.

"Oh, but we shall want some more too," said Edward casually. He went into the dining-room to fetch it.

"Damned awkward," he reflected as he stooped among the bottles. It came of being in such different sets; of knowing such different people, which was to his credit, he thought, pluming himself a little. But it meant, he reflected grimly as he chose his bottle, another row with Ashley, and he had had two rows with Ashley about Gibbs already this term.

He went back with the bottle and sat down on a low stool between them. He uncorked the wine and poured it out. They both looked at him, as he sat between them, admiringly. The vanity which Elanor always laughed at in her brother—he used to comb his hair up by the little glass in the lobby—was flattered. He liked to feel their eyes on him. And yet he was at his

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ease with both of them, he thought with some complacency; he could talk hunting with Gibbs and books with Ashley. But Ashley could only talk about books, and Gibbs—he smiled—could only talk about girls and horses. He poured out three glasses of wine.

Ashley sipped gingerly, and Gibbs, with his great red hands on the glass, gulped rather. With an adroitness that was a little slick, Edward switched the talk onto common lines—college gossip; races; dons. Then Ashley, glancing at the books on the table, said:

"And what about you?"

"Oh, I haven't the ghost of a chance," said Edward. His indifference was affected. He always made out that he despised examinations. Gibbs was taken in by him; he believed that Edward really did not care if he got a first or not, and while he admired him for this indifference, he was concerned about it. But Ashley smiled; he saw through him. He often caught Edward out in small vanities like this; but they only served to endear him more. He felt much older, and in some way responsible for him. How beautiful he looks, he thought, sitting between them with the light falling on the top of his fair hair; like a Greek boy; so strong; and yet in some way, needing his protection.

He ought to be rescued from brutes like Gibbs, he thought savagely. For how Edward could tolerate that clumsy brute, who always seemed to smell of beer and horses, Ashley could not conceive. And he was always there. As he came in he had caught the tail of an infuriating sentence—something that seemed to show that they had made some plan together. Edward had refused to make any plans for the long vacation with him. He had to work; and his mother was ill, he had said.

"Well, then, I'll see Storey about that hack," Gibbs was saying now, as if he were finishing some private talk that they had been having before he came in. A spasm of jealousy and rage ran through him. To hide it, he stretched out his hand and took up a book that lay open on the table. He pretended to read it.

Gibbs felt that he did it to insult him. Ashley thought him a great hulking brute, he knew; the dirty little swine came in, spoilt the talk, and then began to give himself airs at Gibbs's expense. Very well; he had been going to get up and go; now he would stay on; he would sit him out; he would twist his tail for him—he knew how. He turned to Edward and went on talking as if they were alone. He made it very plain that Edward was coming to the Towers in September.

"You won't mind pigging it," he said. "My people will be up in Scotland."

Ashley turned a page viciously. They would be alone then. Edward began to relish the situation. He played up to it maliciously.

"All right," he said. "About the 10th, I should think. But you'll have to see I don't make a fool of myself."

"Oh, it'll only be cubbing," said Gibbs. "And if I can get that back I was speaking about—" Ashley turned another page. Edward glanced at the book. He rather thought it was being held upside down. They went on talking about cubbing in September. Ashley lay back in his chair. He had given up pretending to read. Edward felt him listening, he felt him criticising. After a time he began to tire of the game. Gibbs could be a bit of a bore after all: there he was telling the same

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old story all over again. And he was anxious for Ashley's good opinion. There would be a devil's own row tomorrow he thought, and these rows with Ashley upset his work damnably. He glanced surreptitiously at his watch. It was past eleven; and he meant to do an hour's work before breakfast. He swallowed down the last drops of his wine and rose. He stretched himself and yawned ostentatiously.

"I'm off to bed," he said. Ashley looked at him appealingly. But Edward narrowed his eyes into a hard stare that Ashley dreaded. It was no good when Edward looked like that, he knew; Edward could torture him horribly. Edward began unbuttoning his waistcoat; he had the most perfect figure, Ashley thought, looking at him, standing between them.

"Well, I'm off," said Edward, yawning again. "But don't you hurry. Finish your drinks," he said. He smiled at the thought of Ashley and Gibbs finishing their drinks together.

"There's plenty more in there if you want it." He indicated the next room and left them.

"Let 'em fight it out together," he thought as he shut the bedroom door. His own fight would come soon enough. He knew that from the look on Ashley's face. He was infernally jealous. He could keep Edward up all night making scenes. Whereas, with old Gibbs, there was the riding and the hunting; and there was always a pretty housemaid or an innkeeper's daughter—at least he left one alone of an evening. He began to undress. He put his money methodically in two heaps on either side of the looking-glass; he was a little near about money. He folded his waistcoat carefully on a chair. Then he glanced at himself in the looking-glass, and brushed his crest up with the half-conscious gesture that irritated his sister.

A door slammed outside. One of them had gone—either Gibbs or Ashley. But one, he rather thought, was still there. He listened intently. He heard someone moving about in the sitting-room. Very quickly, very firmly, he turned the key in the door. A moment later the handle moved.

"Edward!" said Ashley. His voice was low and controlled.

Edward made no answer.

"Edward!" said Ashley, rattling the handle.

The voice was sharp and appealing.

"Good-night," said Edward sharply. He listened. There was a pause. Then he heard the door shut. Ashley was gone.

"Lord! What a row there'll be tomorrow," said Edward with a little grimace.

He stood for a moment at the window, looking out into the garden. The darkness was now thicker and blacker; the rain was falling steadily. A bird shuffled somewhere under the wet leaves. But over there in the Master's Lodge lights still burnt in the large room off the ground floor. There must be a party, he thought. It was still going on. But whom was Kitty talking to? What was she saying? He stood there gazing out into the wet night, which was full of sounds—china crashed, a piano tinkled, a door slammed, and the rain fell chuckling and burbling into the gutters.

"Damn it all!" he sighed, and turned, put out the light, and got into bed.

They were all standing up in the long drawing-room at the Lodge.

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"I'm so glad Chuffy—Dr. Andrews—came up to your expectations," Mrs Malone was saying in her courteous manner. As residents they called the great Doctor "Chuffy"; he was Dr. Andrews to American visitors.

The other guests had gone. But the Howard Fripps, the Americans, were staying in the house. They were all standing up, as people do when it is hardly worth while to sit down again. Mrs Howard Fripp was saying that Dr. Andrews had been perfectly charming to her. And her husband, the Professor, was saying something equally polite to the Master. Kitty, the daughter, standing a little in the background, wished that they would get it over and come to bed. But she had to stand there until her mother gave the signal for the move.

"Yes, I never knew Chuffy in better form," her father continued, implying a compliment to the little American lady who had made such a conquest. She was small and vivacious, and Chuffy liked ladies to be small and vivacious.

"I adore his books," she said in her queer nasal voice. "But I never expected to have the pleasure of sitting next him at dinner."

Did you really like the way he spits when he talks? Kitty wondered, looking at her. She was extraordinarily pretty and gay. All the other women had looked dowdy and dumpy beside her, except her mother. For Mrs Malone, standing by the fireplace with her foot on the fender, with her crisp white hair curled stiffly above her sensible handsome face, always remained burnished and stately; she never looked in the fashion or out of it. Mrs Fripp, on the contrary, looked in the fashion.

And yet they laughed at her, Kitty thought. She had caught the Oxford ladies lifting their eyebrows at some of Mrs Fripp's American phrases. But Kitty liked the way she talked her American phrases; they sounded so crisp; so unlike what she was accustomed to. She was American, a real American; but nobody would have taken her husband for an American, Kitty thought, looking at him. He might have been any professor, from any University, she thought, with his distinguished wrinkled face, his goatee beard and the black ribbon of his eyeglass crossing his shirt-front as if it were some foreign order. He spoke without any accent—at least without any American accent. Yet he too was different somehow. She had dropped her handkerchief. He stooped at once and gave it her with a bow that was almost too courteous. Old Chuffy would never have done that—for one thing he was much too fat. She bent her head and smiled at the Professor, rather shyly, as she took the handkerchief.

"Thank you so much," she said. He made her feel rather awkward. Beside Mrs Fripp she felt even larger than usual. Her hair, of the true Rigby red, never lay as smooth as it should have done; Mrs Fripp's hair was done perfectly simply; yet it looked beautiful, glossy and tidy.

But now Mrs Malone, glancing at Mrs Fripp, said, "Well, ladies—?" and waved her hand.

There was something authoritative about her action—as if she had done it again and again; and been obeyed again and again. They moved towards the

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door. Tonight there was a little ceremony at the door; Professor Fripp bent very low over Mrs Malone's hand, not quite so low over Kitty's hand, and held the door wide open for them.

"He rather overdoes it," Kitty thought to herself as they passed out.

The ladies took their candles and went in single file up the wide low stairs. Portraits of former masters of Katharine's looked down on them as they mounted. The light of the candles flickered over the dark gold-framed faces as they went up stair after stair.

Now she'll stop, thought Kitty, following behind, and ask who that is.

But Mrs Fripp did not stop. Kitty gave her good marks for that. She compared favourably with most of their visitors, Kitty thought. She had never done the Bodleian quite so quick as she had done it that morning. Indeed, she had felt rather guilty. There were a great many more things that they could have seen, had they wished. But after only some three-quarters of an hour of it Mrs Fripp had turned to Kitty and said in her fascinating, if nasal, voice:

"Well, my dear, I guess you're a bit fed-up with sights—what d'you say to an ice in that dear old bunshop with the bow windows?"

And they had eaten ices when they ought to have been going round the Bodleian.

The procession had now reached the first landing, and Mrs Malone stopped at the door of the famous room where distinguished guests always slept when they stayed at the Lodge. She gave one look round to see that everything was all right as she held the door open.

"The bed where Queen Elizabeth did *not* sleep," she said, making the usual little joke as they looked at the great four-poster. The fire was burning; the water-jug was swaddled up like an old woman with the toothache; and the candles were lit on the dressing-table. But there was something strange about the room tonight, Kitty thought, glancing over her mother's shoulder; a dressing-gown flashed green and silver upon the bed. And on the dressing-table there were a number of little pots and jars and a large powder-puff in a silver box stained with pink. Could it be, was it possible, that the reason why Mrs Fripp looked so very bright and the Oxford ladies looked so very dingy was that Mrs Fripp— But Mrs Malone was saying, "You have everything you want?" and she was saying it with such extreme politeness that Kitty guessed that Mrs Malone too had seen the dressing-table. Kitty held out her hand. To her surprise, instead of taking it, Mrs Fripp pulled her down and kissed her.

"Thanks a thousand times for showing me all those sights," she said. "And remember, you're coming to stay with us in America," she added. For she had liked the big shy girl who had so obviously preferred eating ices to showing her the Bodleian; and she had felt sorry for her too for some reason: she had not seemed very anxious to go home to tea.

"Good-night, Kitty," said her mother as she shut the door; and they touched each other rather perfunctorily on the cheek.

Kitty went on upstairs to her own room. She still felt the spot where Mrs Fripp had kissed her, as if the

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kiss had left a little glow on her cheek.

Thank goodness, she said to herself, as she went into her room and shut the door, that's over. It was the worst day of the week—they had had people for lunch, undergraduates to tea, and a dinner-party to end with. The room was very stuffy. It was a warm muggy night, but they always shut the windows and drew the curtains. She opened the windows and drew the curtains. It was raining as usual. Then she kicked off her shoes. That was the worst of being so large—shoes were always too tight; white satin shoes in particular. Then she began to unhook her dress. It was difficult; there were so many hooks at the back; but at last the white satin dress was off and laid neatly across the chair; and then she began to brush her hair. It had been Thursday at its very worst, she reflected; sights in the morning; people for lunch; undergraduates for tea; and then a dinner-party in the evening. What had possessed the little man from Balliol to come at half-past four when nobody was expected till five at earliest? And why had he stayed till seven? She wondered, brushing her hair vigorously; it was like a fuzz-bush, her nurse used to say.

There must have been twelve of them all at once, she thought, going back to the tea-party. The door never seemed to stop opening; she had poured out cup after cup.

And he wouldn't have gone even then, she thought, seeing again the boy with the red face sitting silent, twisting his hands, if Mama hadn't got up and said we must dress for dinner.

However, she concluded, tugging the comb through her hair, it's over for another week anyhow.

The candles flickered and then the muslin blind, blowing out in a balloon, almost touched the flame. She opened her eyes with a start. There she was standing at the open window with a light beside her in her petticoat. She had been scolded for doing that only the other day.

"Anybody might see in," her mother had said sharply.

Now, she said, moving the candles to a table at the right, nobody can see in.

She began to brush her hair again. But with the light at the side instead of in front she saw her face from a different angle. She put down her comb and looked in the glass.

Am I pretty, or am I not pretty? she asked herself. Her cheek-bones were too prominent and her eyes were set too far apart. But they're good eyes, she thought. And her skin—her skin was always said to be one of her best points. But she was not pretty; no, her size was against her. What did Mrs Fripp think of me, she wondered?

She kissed me, she suddenly remembered with a start of pleasure, feeling again the glow on her cheek, and asked me to go and stay with them in America.

What fun that would be! she thought. Heavens, what fun that would be, to leave Oxford and go to America! She tugged the comb through her hair; she brushed it vigorously. The bells were beginning to strike.

I wonder what America, she thought, what America is like?

But the bells were making their usual commotion. She hated the sound of the bells, it always seemed to her a dismal sound; and then, just as one stopped, here

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was another beginning. They went walloping one over another, one after another, as if they would never be finished. She counted eleven, twelve, and then they went on thirteen, fourteen . . . clock repeating clock one after another. It was late. She must shut the window. But as she stood discreetly shaded she heard a roar of laughter from the undergraduate quarters. She could not help smiling to herself.

What are they laughing at? she wondered. They never laughed like that when they came to tea at the Lodge, she thought. When they came to tea at the Lodge they just sat on and on, fumbling their fingers, twisting their pocket handkerchiefs, and she had to make conversation. But some of them are nice, she thought, drawing the curtain. Mr Hammond, for instance, and she got on with Lord Lammermuir; he had beautiful manners; she found him easy to talk to. She went to the washing-table and began to brush her teeth.

So's Mr Ashley, she said, if it comes to that. He could talk like a grown-up person. But she did not like him. He made her feel that he was trying to find out something about her. He always asked her questions about her cousin Edward.

She brushed her teeth very vigorously. She began to think about Edward.

I'm sure he's not in love with me, she said, as if she were meeting some objection on the part of another person. His eyes are rather small, she thought.

Elanor calls him Nigs, she added. He was a bit of a barber's block, she agreed; but very handsome. At a picnic the other day he had followed her; it was as if her body possessed some power to draw him to her;—she recalled the curious sensation that she had felt that day at the picnic. He was always beside her, and she liked the feeling.

But nothing would induce me to marry him! she exclaimed. Think of being a don's wife—a don's wife—she glanced at the calendar above the wash-stand and read the motto on the page before she tore it off—think of being a don's wife, she concluded, crumpling up the paper, and living in Oxford for ever! She tossed the little screw of paper into the fireplace.

"Friday" in large red letters confronted her. Friday, yes; it was already Friday; except that this hour was neither one thing nor the other. Friday was a good day; Friday was the best day of the week, she thought. She had her lesson with Lucy; and she was going to tea with the Robsons. She looked forward to Friday. With any luck, the Fripps would be gone by lunch-time. And then she would go and have her lesson with Lucy.

"Blessed is he who has found his work," she read, automatically, that was Friday's motto, "let him ask no other blessedness." It was odd how calendars always seemed to be talking at you, she reflected. It reminded her. She glanced at a shelf of books in the corner. Among the children's books and the fairy tales that were slipping out of their covers there was one stout blue volume with a strip of paper between the pages. She heaved a sigh as she finished brushing her teeth. Then she took the book from the shelf, and sat up in bed with it open on her knees. There were twenty pages, she counted, to the end of the chapter: could she read twenty pages before she went to sleep? She turned them over. With luck there might be notes;

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yes, there were several notes to this chapter; and notes could be skipped. If she forced herself to read steadily for an hour, she might just do it, she decided, considering the notes. She pulled the candle closer and applied herself with a little frown to Chuffy's *Constitutional History of England*—old Chuffy, who always spat when he talked, she thought; old Chuffy, who liked ladies to be small and vivacious. She saw him again talking to Mrs Fripp. Little fragments of their conversation came back to her. Mrs Fripp had made a conquest of old Chuffy. . . . But she must read; she must fix her mind upon the book, or Lucy tomorrow. . . . She read steadily. But soon she found that she was reading the same sentence again and again. "Some constitutional change was inevitable," she read, "but the question arose. . . . Some constitutional change was inevitable," she read again, "but the question arose, should it be centralised or unitary?" Should it be centralised or unitary, she repeated with a yawn. What did it mean? Her eyes shut; the book fell out of her hand with a thud on the floor. It was no use trying to read. She must get up early and finish the chapter before breakfast. She turned over and blew out the candle.

"Umbrella, Miss?" said Hiscock, offering her an umbrella as she left the house rather later than she should have left it the following afternoon. She took the umbrella, though it was not actually raining today; but there were clouds; and a chilliness in the air which made her glad, as she caught sight of a party with white and yellow frocks and cushions bound for the river, that she was not going to sit in a boat today. She turned off down a side street with a feeling of relief. No parties today, she thought, no parties today. But she was late, the clock warned her.

She strode along until she came to the cheap red villas that her father disliked so much that he would always make a round to avoid them. But as it was in one of these cheap red villas that Miss Craddock lived, and as her presence affected the neighbourhood, Kitty saw the cheap red villas with a halo of romance and of excitement round them. Her heart beat faster as she turned the corner by the new chapel and saw the house where Miss Craddock actually lived. Those were the steps she went up and down every day; that was her window; and this was her bell. The bell came out with a jerk when she pulled it; but it did not go back again, for everything was ramshackle in Lucy's house, but everything was romantic. Everything in the house seemed to her exciting; there was Lucy's umbrella in the stand; and it too was not like other umbrellas; it had a parrot's head for a handle. But as she went up the steep stairs the excitement of seeing Lucy became mixed with apprehension; she had overslept herself; once more she had scamped her work; she had not "given her mind to it" again this week.

Miss Craddock was sitting at the table waiting for her. A very small woman with a red-tipped nose, she was not unlike the parrot on her umbrella, but there was something owl-like about the eyes; they were sad eyes with their patient expression. She had been waiting for some time. As she sat waiting she glanced now at the clock—Kitty was late again—and now at a manuscript. She had made notes in red ink on the margin;

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but she had stopped making notes. What was the good of correcting that essay? What was the good of teaching girls like Kitty history? And what was the good, she thought, glancing at the clock again, of complaining? She sighed. Then she heard a ring at the bell. Kitty came upstairs. She came in rather breathlessly.

"I'm awfully sorry, Miss Craddock," she said, taking off her things and sitting down at the table.

"Only ten minutes late today," said Miss Craddock with her usual irony.

"We had people staying in the house," said Kitty.

Miss Craddock brushed her hand over her mouth in a way she had when she was disappointed.

"I see," she said. "So you haven't done any work this week either."

She was at once sarcastic and long-suffering—a combination that Kitty found harrowing in the extreme. She took up her pen and dipped it in the red ink. Then she turned to the essay.

"It really wasn't worth correcting," she remarked, pausing with her pen in the air. Kitty blushed bright red.

"A child of ten would have been ashamed of it," said Miss Craddock.

Then she went through the essay point by point, patiently, conscientiously for a full hour. At last she stopped and leant back in her chair.

"And the odd thing is," she added, "you've got quite an original mind."

Kitty flushed bright red with pleasure.

"But you don't use it," said Miss Craddock. "Why don't you use it?" she added, looking at her out of her fine grey eyes.

"You see, Miss Craddock," Kitty began eagerly, "it's awfully difficult at home. You see, my mother—"

"Hm . . . hm . . . hm . . ." Miss Craddock stopped her. Confidences were not what Dr. Malone paid her for. She got up. The lesson was over. Kitty got up too.

"Look at my flowers," said Miss Craddock, feeling that she had perhaps snubbed her too severely. There was a bowl of flowers on the table; wild flowers, blue and white, stuck into a cushion of wet green moss.

"My sister sent them from the moors," she said.

"The moors?" said Kitty. "Which moors?" She stooped and touched the little flowers tenderly. How lovely she is, Miss Craddock thought; and how very young. Did it matter if Kitty knew history or not? she asked herself.

"The Scarborough moors," she said aloud. "If you keep the moss damp but not too damp, they'll last for weeks," she added, in her precise way.

"Damp, but not too damp," Kitty smiled. "That's easy in Oxford, I should think. It's always raining here." She looked at the window. Mild rain was falling. "It rains up there, I can assure you," said Miss Craddock.

"Yes. But it's real rain there," said Kitty. She took up her umbrella.

"If I lived up there, Miss Craddock—" she began. But she stopped. The lesson was over.

"You'd find it very dull," said Miss Craddock, looking at her. She was putting on her cloak.

"I shouldn't. I should love it," said Kitty energetically.

"When I was your age—" Miss Craddock began. She saw herself with a Latin grammar propped up

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against a pudding basin. Her father had been a country doctor in Yorkshire.

"When you were my age—?" Kitty prompted her. Her eyes were full of affection; Miss Craddock was touched; she guessed at her devotion.

"One of these days I'll tell you all about it," said Miss Craddock.

Kitty drew on her gloves.

"When I was your age," Miss Craddock began again, remembering her rôle as teacher, "I would have given my eyes to have the opportunities you have." Kitty looked at her.

"But, Miss Craddock," she began, meaning that to be Miss Craddock must be enough for anyone.

"Yes. To meet the people you meet; to know the people you know," said Miss Craddock.

"Old Chuffy?" said Kitty, remembering Miss Craddock's profound admiration for that light of learning.

"You irreverent girl!" Miss Craddock expostulated. "The greatest historian of his age!"

"Well, he doesn't talk history to me," said Kitty. To her he was apt to be grumpy, and to tell her what things he could eat, and what things he had to avoid.

She longed to stay, but another pupil was coming probably. She glanced round the room. There was a plate of oranges on the top of a pile of shiny exercise-books: there was a box that looked as if it contained biscuits. Was this her only room, she wondered? Did she sleep on the lumpy-looking sofa with the shawl thrown over it? At any rate there was no looking-glass, and she stuck her hat on rather to one side. Probably Miss Craddock despised clothes, she thought as she did so.

"What a pretty hat!" Miss Craddock said, however, rather shyly.

It must be wonderful, she was thinking, to be young and lovely and to meet brilliant men.

"This? Oh, it's my last year's hat," said Kitty, holding out her hand to say good-bye.

"I'm going to tea with the Robsons," she added. The girl, Nelly Robson, was Miss Craddock's favourite pupil; the only girl, she used to say, who knew what work meant.

"Are you walking?" said Miss Craddock, looking at her clothes. "It's some way, you know. Down Ringmer Road, past the gasworks."

"Yes, I'm walking," said Kitty, shaking hands.

"And I really will try to work hard this week," she said, looking down at her shyly; and she went down the stairs, and gave one more look at the umbrella that had a parrot for a handle.

"Down Ringmer Road, past the gasworks," she repeated as she walked, but she was too excited to think where she was going. Lessons with Lucy always excited her; and to go from her to the Robsons' excited her too. She seemed to be passing quickly over the surface of things; and everything appeared very strange and new, but she was too excited to notice anything in detail. She lost her way. Here was a part of Oxford that was unfamiliar to her; here were shops and villas that she had never seen before. The houses were all exactly like each other; they all had little front gardens and little flights of steps, but it seemed to her that she was in an unknown world;—as if she had run

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away from her nurse. . . . She stopped. She had lost her way.

"Down Ringmer Road and past the gasworks," she repeated. Only by asking her way at the greengrocer's, then at a post-office, did she at length find Prestwich Terrace.

"And our house is the one at the end, our house is the one at the end," she repeated to herself, glancing down the row of red villas. As she stood on the step at the house at the end, noting the cheap lace curtains and the blue and orange glass, she tried to remember what her father had said about Nelly's father. "A remarkable man, Robson—a man who—" But here the door opened and a little maid, a girl of sixteen, let her in and put her to wait in the side room, the one with the lace curtains. Kitty's own size seemed to increase alarmingly as she went in. She was so very big; and the room seemed so very small. It was also very crowded; there were bamboo tables, silver vases, marble clocks. She glanced at herself in the draped-looking glass over the mantelpiece.

How absurd I look! she thought. But it's only last year's hat, she said to encourage herself. She was feeling very nervous. She looked round her. She looked at the photographs. In the middle of the wall hung a huge enlarged photograph of an old woman who was something like Bigge, the cook at the Lodge; a pursed-up old woman, with parted hair like the hair in an engraving, sitting on the edge of a chair in her best clothes with a book in her hand.

What had her father said—that he was a working man, Mr Robson? She glanced at an illuminated scroll framed like a text. "This is to certify that George Samuel Robson—" she began reading, when the door opened; Nelly, her friend, Miss Craddock's favourite pupil, came in, and all her fears were confirmed. She was much too well dressed. Nelly Robson wore a brown holland pinafore which covered her completely, and seemed to increase her shortness, her dumpiness and her air of uncompromising veracity. She wore steel spectacles over her large grey eyes.

"We're having tea in the back room," she said, looking her up and down. What has she been doing? Why is she dressed in an overall? Kitty thought, following her.

"Mother," said Nelly, "Kitty Malone." Tea had already begun.

"Pleased to see you," said Mrs Robson formally, looking over her shoulder. But nobody seemed in the least pleased to see her. Mrs Robson was doing something to a child's bib, for there were two children; and they were already eating. Slices of bread and butter were in their hands, but they stayed the bread and butter and stared at Kitty as she sat down.

Why didn't I put on my oldest clothes? she thought again. She was absurdly overdressed. She seemed to see the whole room at once. It was bare yet crowded. The table was too large; there were hard green-plush chairs; yet the table-cloth was coarse; darned in the middle; and the china was cheap with its bright red roses. The light was extraordinarily bright in her eyes. A sound of hammering came in from the garden outside. She looked at the garden; it was a scratched-up, earthy garden without flower-beds; and there was a shed at the end of the garden from which the sound of hammering came.

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They're all so short too, Kitty thought, glancing at Mrs Robson. Only her shoulders came above the tea things; but her shoulders were very substantial. She too was a little like Bigge, the cook at the Lodge, Kitty thought; but more formidable. She had steel-grey eyes like Nelly's, but they were without spectacles. She gave one brief look at Mrs Robson and then began to pull off her gloves secretly, swiftly, under the cover of the table-cloth. But why does nobody talk? she thought nervously. The children kept their eyes fixed upon her with a look of solemn amazement. Their owl-like stare went up and down over her uncompromisingly. Happily before they could express their disapproval, Mrs Robson told them sharply to go on with their tea; and the bread and butter slowly rose to their mouths again.

Why don't they say something? Kitty thought again, glancing at Nelly. She was about to speak—but all her small talk seemed out of place here—when a door slammed; an umbrella grated in the hall; and Mrs Robson looked up and said, not to Kitty but to her daughter:

"There's Dad!"

Nelly got up and went out of the room as if to fetch something. Next moment in bustled a little man who must, Kitty supposed, be Dad; that is, Mr Robson. He was rather like a boy in an Eton jacket, she thought; he was so short and so chubby; but he had grey moustaches and rather prominent blue eyes, and he spoke with a curious accent.

"Pleased to see you," he said, and gripped her hand hard in his. He spoke more cordially than his wife, she noted. He sat down, tucked a napkin under his chin so that it obscured his heavy silver watch-chain; like a schoolboy's, Kitty thought. Hammer, hammer, hammer came from the shed in the garden.

"Tell Jo tea's on the table," said Mrs Robson to Nelly, who had brought in a dish with a cover on it. The cover was removed. Actually they were going to eat fried fish and potatoes at tea-time, Kitty thought. It reminded her of Yorkshire; it was like having tea at Carter's, the farm up in Yorkshire, where she was sent as a child to recover from measles.

But Mr Robson had turned his rather prominent blue eyes upon her. She expected him to say, "How is your father, Miss Malone?"

But instead he said:

"You're reading history with Lucy Craddock?"

"Yes," she said. She liked the way he said Lucy Craddock, as if he respected her—so many of the Oxford dons, like old Chuffy for example, sneered at her. She liked feeling too, as he made her feel, that she was nobody's daughter in particular.

"You're interested in history?" he said, applying himself to his fish and potatoes. It must be their dinner, Kitty concluded. She looked at the loaf of bread; it had brown corners and there was a dust of white flour in the crevices. They must bake their own bread, she thought.

"I love it," she said. His bright blue eyes, gazing straight at her rather fiercely, seemed to make her say quite shortly what she meant.

"A grand teacher, Lucy," he said, with his curious accent.

"But I'm frightfully lazy," said Kitty, remembering that Miss Craddock had said that Nell—all their names

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were shortened; Dad, Mum, Nell, Peg, Dick, as if to suit the shortness of their statures—that Nell was the only one of her pupils who knew what work meant. Here Mrs Robson looked at her rather sternly. Nell handed her a thick slice of bread on the point of a knife.

"What——" Kitty began. She wanted to praise the bread; but "delicious," the word that came to her lips, seemed to be the wrong word.

"What delicious bread," she said however, using the wrong word.

"Pleased you like it," said Mrs Robson stiffly.

Anyhow their taste is awful, she said to herself, by way of revenge for the snub that she felt was intended. She focussed her eyes on a picture opposite—an oily landscape in a heavy gilt frame. There was a blue and red Japanese plate on either side of it. Everything was ugly, if you looked at it in detail, especially the picture.

"The moor at the back of our house," said Mr Robson, seeing her look at it.

It suddenly came over Kitty that the accent with which he spoke was a Yorkshire accent. In looking at the picture he had increased his accent.

"In Yorkshire?" she said. "We come from there too. My mother's family I mean," she added, still vaguely feeling that they would know about her father's family, and about her mother's family, and how one came from Devonshire and the other from Yorkshire.

"Your mother's family?" said Mr Robson. Kitty wanted to conceal the name, lest Mrs Robson should despise that too. She might think them too well-born, but she could not invent another name on the spur of the moment.

"Rigby," she said, and blushed slightly.

"Rigby?" said Mrs Robson, looking up.

"I wur-r-eked for a Miss Rigby before I married."

What sort of wur-r-ek had Mrs Robson done? Kitty wondered. Sam did not leave her long in doubt.

"My wife was a cook, Miss Malone, before we married," he said. It seemed to Kitty that he increased his accent purposely as if he were proud of it, and she slightly resented his pride. I had a great-uncle who rode in a circus, she felt inclined to say: and an Aunt who married . . . but Mrs Robson interrupted her.

"The Hollies," said Mrs Robson. "Two very old ladies; Miss Ann and Miss Matilda." She spoke more gently, reminiscently.

Kitty could not place them immediately, but she was anxious to claim them.

"They must be cousins of my mother's," she said.

"There are lots of us up there," she added—"all over the place."

"It's a well-known name," Mrs Robson conceded, looking at Kitty more amiably—she was not one of the usual Oxford ladies, she thought; if she had been her own daughter, she was thinking, she could have made something of her.

"But the old lady must be dead long ago," she added. For the first time she leant back in her chair and stirred her tea, just as old Snap at the farm, Kitty thought, stirred her tea round and round. Yes, she thought, glancing at her, she's a mixture of old Snap, who had been her mother's nurse, and of—who was it? . . . somebody quite different. . . . Lady Fairhaven, that was it—only without the lace and the diamond brooch. She had exactly the old dowager's way of looking at you, and coming out with something unexpected and generally unpleasant.

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They were silent. It was odd not being anybody in particular, Kitty thought to herself. When you stopped being your father's daughter there were none of the usual things to talk about. But she liked it. She felt as if she were on her own . . . as if she had run away from her nurse.

"Tell Jo we're not sparing the cake," said Mr Robson, cutting himself a slice of that craggy-looking object; and Nell went out of the room once more. The hammering stopped in the garden. The door opened. Kitty had altered the focus of her eyes insensibly to suit the smallness of the Robson family, and the young man who came in therefore took her by surprise. He was about her own height; but he seemed immense after the others in that little room. He was a handsome young man of about her own age. He brushed his hand through his hair as he came in; a wood shaving had stuck in it.

"Our Jo," said Mrs Robson, introducing them. "Go and get the kittle, Jo," she added; and he went at once as if he were used to it. He had scarcely looked at Kitty as he shook hands; but she remembered her own appearance again, which she had forgotten, as he came back with the kettle. Sam began chaffing him as he sat down.

"It takes you a long time, my son, to mend a hen-coop," he said. A family joke started with Nell and Jo and Dad and Mum which she could not follow; something about mending boots came into it, as far as she could understand. She watched him eating steadily and silently under his father's banter. He came under none of the headings that she was used to. He was not Eton or Harrow, or Rugby or Winchester; he was not reading or rowing—no. He reminded her of Alf, the farm hand up at Carter's, who had kissed her under the shadow of the haystack; except that Jo wore spectacles. He gave her one quick look as she passed him the butter; it was a sulky look; yet in some submerged part of her she remembered that vivid moment when she was fifteen, and the farm hand suddenly threw his arms round her and old Carter loomed up leading a bull with a ring through its nose and said "Stop that!" She looked down again. She would rather like Jo to kiss her; better than Edward, she thought to herself suddenly. But he was not really like the boy with the pitchfork, she thought, glancing at him again; he wore spectacles, and he was, she gathered from something that Sam was saying about examinations, an engineer, was it? Like the fried fish and the hencoops and the Japanese plates on the wall, he belonged to an Oxford of which she knew nothing. But she liked him. Yes, she liked them all very much, she told herself; but then Mrs Robson turned to her and began talking to her in quite a friendly way, about some place in Yorkshire that they both knew. There had been many changes since Mrs Robson had last seen it. They had built a grand new chapel, she had been told. They talked quite easily about Yorkshire: they got on very well when they talked about Yorkshire.

Then the children began scrambling down off their chairs. They wanted to be off; everybody wanted to be off, Kitty felt; the meal was over. She began to fish under the table for her gloves.

"These them?" said Jo, picking them up off the floor. She took them and crumpled them up in her hand. But after all it did not matter so much now

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whether she wore gloves or not: they had passed the glove stage. What was to happen next, she wondered? She suspected that Nell lent a hand with the washing up—hence her overall. Mrs Robson was taking her into the little front room where before tea Kitty had looked into the glass and had begun to read the certificates that were framed like a text. Mrs Robson was taking the responsibility of entertaining her upon herself apparently.

She made her go in first, and then, just as her mother did when people came to the Lodge, she began showing her things, only here it was not the Reynolds portrait, or the sketch that was said to be by Gainsborough, but a huge silver salver with an inscription.

"The salver my husband's pupils gave him," Mrs Robson began, pointing to the inscription on the salver. Kitty looked; she began to spell out the inscription.

"And this," said Mrs Robson, when she had done, pointing to the text on the wall, "this——"

But here Sam, who stood in the background fiddling with his watch-chain as if he tolerated his wife's familiar story of his triumphal progress, interrupted her. He stepped forward and indicated with his stubby little forefinger the picture of the old woman looking rather over life size in the photographer's chair.

"My mother," he said and stopped. He gave a queer little chuckle.

"Your mother?" Kitty repeated, stooping to look. What was she to say about her? The unwieldy old lady, posed in all the stiffness of her best clothes, was plain in the extreme. And yet Kitty felt that admiration was expected. She could feel Sam bristle slightly as he stood by her.

"You're very like her, Mr Robson," was all she could find to say. Indeed they had something of the same sturdy look; the same piercing, rather prominent bright eyes; and they were both very plain. He gave an odd little chuckle.

"Glad you think so," he said. "Brought us all up. Not one of them a patch on her though." He gave his odd little chuckle again.

Then he turned to his daughter, who had come in and was standing there in her overall.

"Not a patch on her," he repeated, pinching Nell on the shoulder. She stood there with her father's hand on her shoulder under the portrait of her grandmother. She was rather like the old woman in the picture too, Kitty thought. A sudden rush of self-pity came over her as she looked at her. Lucy Craddock said she was the only girl who knew what work meant. But if she had been the daughter of people like the Robsons, she thought; if she had lived in the north—but it was clear they wanted her to go. Nobody ever sat down and talked in this room. They were all standing up. Nobody pressed her to stay. When she said that she must go, they all came out into the little hall with her. They were all about to go on with what they were doing, she felt. Nell was about to go into the kitchen and wash up the tea things, she felt; Jo was about to return to his hencoops; the children were about to be put to bed by their mother; and Sam—what was he about to do? She looked at him standing there with his heavy watch-chain, like a schoolboy's; was he about to mend the boots? she wondered; but wasn't he some sort of Professor?

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"Pleased to have made your acquaintance," said Mrs Robson in her stately way.

"Hope you'll come again soon," said Mr Robson, grasping her hand very hard.

"Oh, I should love to!" she exclaimed, pressing his hand as hard as she could. Did they know how much she admired them? she wanted to say. Would they accept her in spite of her hat and her gloves? she wanted to ask. But they were all going off to their work. And I am going home to dress for dinner, she thought as she walked down the little front steps, pressing her pale kid gloves in her hands.

She walked very quickly through the little suburban streets, with their brand new chapels, their unfamiliar shops and their cheap red villas with the absurd, pretentious names. The sun was shining again; the damp pavements gleamed; a gust of wind tossed up the wet branches of the almond trees in the villa gardens; and little twigs and tufts of blossom whirled down onto the pavement and stuck there. As she stood still for a second at a crossing she too seemed to be tossed aloft out of her usual surroundings. She forgot for a moment where she was. The sky, blown into a blue open space, seemed to be looking down not here upon streets and houses, but upon open country, where the wind brushed the moors, and sheep, with grey fleeces ruffled, sheltered under stone walls. She could almost see the moors brighten and darken as the clouds passed over them.

But then in two strides the unfamiliar street became the street she had always known. Here she was again in the paved alley; there were the old curiosity shops with their blue china and their brass warming-pans; and next moment she was out in the famous crooked street with all the domes and steeples. The sun lay in broad stripes across it. There were the cabs and the awnings and the book-shops; there were the old men in black gowns billowing; and the young women in pink and blue dresses flowing; and the young men in straw hats carrying cushions under their arms. But for a moment all seemed to her obsolete, frivolous, insane. The usual undergraduate in cap and gown with books under his arm looked to her somehow silly. She thought of Jo hammering the hen-coop with the wood in his hair. And the portentous old men with their exaggerated features, looked for a moment like gargoyles, carved, mediaeval, unreal. Everything looked staged, like a scene in a play, she thought. They were all like people dressed up and acting parts, she thought. But there was Mrs Lathom, coming along the pavement, and she had to bow. Now she stood at her own door and waited for Hiscock, the butler, to take his feet off the fender and waddle upstairs. Why can't you talk like a human being, she thought, as he took her umbrella and mumbled his usual remark about the weather. He seemed heavier than usual; his eyes looked more pouched and glazed. The hall with its chairs and tables looked lifeless and faded. Through the open drawing-room door she looked out at the smooth lawn and saw the famous tree that never stood up and that never lay down but was supported by a prop in the middle. The covers on the drawing-room chairs looked whiter and the purple birds on the pattern more faded than ever. Somewhere far off she heard the squeak of

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a lawn-mower as it went over the grass.

Slowly, as if a weight had got into her feet too, she went upstairs to her room to change. She kicked off her walking shoes and tossed her gloves on the bed. There were her things laid out for her; there was the dressing-table and the sloping floor and the can of hot water with a towel over it. It all looked very spacious and empty as she sank down on the edge of the bed. A glazed look came over her face as she sat there, now that the quick surface changes of street and house, of saying this, that and the other had ceased to brush across her. She gazed ahead of her. Sam said to me . . . she began. She paused. And then Jo . . . She clasped her hands round her knees as she sat on the edge of her bed. And what would Mrs Robson . . . she began, looking at her dressing-table. What would Nell . . . but here a sound interrupted her. Sweetly and sonorously a bell rang in the hall below. She got up. She stood for a moment at the dressing-table in the window. She hesitated, as if uncertain what to do; then half-consciously her fingers undid some hooks; her dress slipped onto the floor, and she took up her comb. She tugged it abruptly through her hair. A college servant was passing with a pile of tin covers on his head. The clock was striking; she must not be late; she must hurry with her dressing. Happily her frock was a simple one; mercifully she was dining alone with her mother. In a moment she had pinned her hair up, hooked her dress on; and then she ran down the slippery stairs, sliding her palm along the banisters as she used to do when she was a child in a hurry. And there they all were.

She ran into a little group standing at the foot of the stairs. Her father was there in his gown; with him there was a tall man, rather bald on the top of his head, also in a gown, whom she did not recognise. Her mother, less burnished and more domestic than last night but equally upright and equipped, had come out of the drawing-room and was standing talking to them. The tall man looked up and exclaimed:

"My word!" He paused for a moment, looking at her with a look of admiration.

"It is Kitty, isn't it?" he said. Then he took her hand and pressed it.

"How you've grown!" he exclaimed. He looked at her affectionately, as if he were looking not at her but at his own past.

"You don't remember me?" he added.

She did just remember him—a kind young man who had played games with her when she was very small.

"Chingachgook!" she exclaimed.

"But he is now Sir Richard Norton," said her mother, giving him a proud little pat on the shoulder. They turned away for the gentlemen were dining in Hall; there was some celebration.

Kitty followed her mother into the dining-room; the table looked very large as they sat down alone together.

"Been to your lesson, Kitty?" said Mrs Malone rather absentmindedly.

"Yes," said Kitty. "And then to tea with the Robsons," she added.

"Enjoyed yourself?" said Mrs Malone. She was tired tonight, Kitty felt; she had had a long day.

"Yes," she said after a little pause. She always

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paused before she answered her mother; sometimes she left out one thing; sometimes she left out another. Yesterday she had left out about having ices with Mrs Frupp; tonight, if her mother questioned her, she would leave out—practically everything. It was not that she wanted to deceive her; but she was never quite sure what was right and what was wrong, and her mother always knew exactly. Yes, she always knew exactly, she thought looking at her. Now it was the dinner—last night's dinner—that was wrong. As they ate their fish Mrs Malone was lodging a complaint with Hiscock, who had been with them over twenty years, and could be talked to, when they were alone, confidentially, not like a servant.

It was dull fish, Kitty thought; the plates were half cold. It was stale bread she thought, cut in meagre little squares; the colour, the gaiety of Prestwich Terrace, was still in her eyes, in her ears. She granted, as she looked round, the superiority of the Lodge china and silver; and the Japanese plates and the picture had been hideous; but this dining-room with its hanging creepers and its vast cracked canvases was so dark. At Prestwich Terrace the room was full of light; the sound of hammer, hammer, hammer still rang in her ears. She looked out at the fading greens in the garden. For the thousandth time she echoed her childish wish that the tree would either lie down or stand up instead of doing neither. It was not actually raining, but gusts of whiteness seemed to blow about the garden as the wind stirred the thick leaves on the laurels.

"Didn't you notice it?" Mrs Malone suddenly appealed to her.

"What, Mama?" Kitty asked. She had not been attending.

"The odd taste in the fish," said her mother.

"I don't think I did," she said; and Mrs Malone went on talking to the butler. The plates were changed; another dish was brought in. But Kitty was not hungry. She bit one of the green sweets that were provided for her, and then the modest dinner, retrieved for the ladies from the relics of last night's party, was over and she followed her mother into the drawing-room.

It was too big when they were alone, but they always sat there. The pictures seemed to be looking down at the empty chairs, and the empty chairs seemed to be looking up at the pictures. Mrs Malone sat down in the low chair by the little table where she kept her work things, and Kitty sat in the armchair opposite. The old gentleman who had ruled the college over a hundred years ago always seemed to vanish in the daytime, but he came back when the lamps were lit. The urbane eighteenth-century face looked down on them with the look that was so like her father's. He might have been put in a frame just as he was, Kitty always thought. And he liked people to notice the resemblance, because there was a connection, through the Mannings, in the eighteenth century.

"It's nice to have a quiet evening once in a way," Mrs Malone was saying, "though the Fripes . . ." her voice tailed off as she put on her spectacles and took up *The Times*. This was her moment of relaxation and recuperation after the day's work. She suppressed a little yawn as she glanced up and down the columns of the newspaper.

"What a charming man he was," she observed casually, as she looked at the births and deaths. "One

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would hardly have taken him for an American."

Kitty recalled her thoughts. Her mind was wandering. Her mother was talking about the Fripps.

"And I liked her too," she said rashly. "Wasn't she lovely?"

"Hum—m—m. A little overdressed for my taste," said Mrs Malone dryly. "And that accent—" she went on, looking through the paper, "I sometimes hardly understood what she said."

Kitty was silent. Here they differed; as they did about so many things. Her mind went back to Prestwich Terrace. It was as if she had brushed over the surface; now what was sunken began to emerge. He said she was a cook, she thought. She began telling over the story of the Robsons.

Suddenly Mrs Malone looked up and spoke:

"Yes, just what I was saying to Bigge this morning," she said, laying down the paper.

"What, Mama?" said Kitty.

"This man—in the leading article," said Mrs Malone. She touched it with her finger.

"With the best flesh, fish and fowl in the world," she read, "we shall not be able to turn them to account because we have none to cook them—what I was saying to Bigge this morning." She looked up with her quick little sigh. What the man said was perfectly true, she thought. Just when one wanted to impress people, like those Americans, something went wrong. She foraged for her work things. Kitty took up the paper.

"It's the leading article," said Mrs Malone. She wondered who the man was who wrote it; a delightful man, she was sure. He almost always said the very thing that she was thinking; she felt that he and she were in league together; it comforted her, and gave her a sense of security in a world which seemed to her to be changing for the worse.

"Before the rigid and now universal enforcement of school attendance . . ." Kitty read out.

"Yes. That's it," said Mrs Malone, opening her work-box and looking for her scissors.

"... the children saw a good deal of cooking which, poor as it was, yet gave them some taste and inkling of knowledge. They now see nothing and they do nothing but read, write, sum, sew or knit," Kitty read out.

"Yes, yes," said Mrs Malone. She was not attending. She knew of course that the Lodge was a difficult house to run; there were too many rooms, too many stairs and the basement was dark. But why did the kitchen-maid always choose the morning of a party to give warning? She unrolled the long strip of embroidery upon which she was working a design of birds pecking at fruit copied from a tomb at Ravenna. It was for the spare bedroom.

The leading article seemed to Kitty the usual leading article; she was bored by its pomp and its fluency. She searched the paper for some little piece of news that might interest her mother. Mrs Malone liked someone to talk to her or read aloud to her as she worked. Night after night her embroidery served to weave the after-dinner talk into a pleasant harmony. One said something and one stitched; one looked at the design, chose another coloured silk, and stitched again. Sometimes Mr Malone read poetry aloud. Tonight she would have liked Kitty to talk to her.

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But she was becoming increasingly conscious of difficulty with Kitty. Why? She glanced at her. What was wrong? she wondered. She gave her little sigh.

Kitty sat there turning over the large pages; but it all seemed to be about the fluke in sheep, religious liberty in Turkey and the General Election.

"Mr Gladstone—" she began.

Mrs Malone had lost her scissors. It annoyed her.

"Who can have taken them again?" she began.

Kitty went down on the floor to look for them. Mrs Malone ferreted in the work-box; then she plunged her hand into the fissure between the cushion and the chair frame and brought up not only the scissors but also a little mother-of-pearl paper-knife that had been missing for ever so long. The discovery annoyed her. It proved, what she had long suspected, that Ellen, the parlourmaid housemaid, never shook up the cushions properly.

"Here they are, Kitty," she said. But if household worries bothered her, she thought, as she took the scissors, she was much more seriously bothered about her daughter. Why did she never talk to her, naturally, freely? There was always some constraint between them now.

"Did you enjoy your party at the Robsons', Kitty?" she asked, resuming her embroidery. Kitty did not answer.

"There's been an experiment," she said, taking up the paper. "An experiment with electric light. 'A brilliant light,' " she read, "was seen to shoot forth suddenly shooting out a profound ray across the water to the Rock. Everything was lit up as if by daylight." She paused. She saw the bright light from the ships on the red rock. But here the door opened and Hiscock came in with a note on a salver.

Mrs Malone took it and read it in silence.

"No answer," she said to Hiscock. Kitty looked up. From the tone of her mother's voice she knew that something had happened. She sat holding the note in her hand. Hiscock shut the door.

"Rose is dead," said Mrs Malone. "Cousin Rose."

The note lay open on her knee.

"It's from Edward," she said.

"Cousin Rose is dead?" said Kitty. A moment before she had been thinking of a bright light on a red rock. Now the drawing-room at the Lodge with its oil-lamps looked very dingy. Mrs Malone stuck her needle into her embroidery.

"Poor Rose," she said. "Just when the children most needed her." She sighed and then she rolled up her embroidery slowly. Kitty had only seen Cousin Rose once or twice. But her mother minded; they had been girls together. She sat silent.

"It is a great release for her," said Mrs Malone. "It was hopeless—hopeless from the first." She paused.

"Fetch me my engagement book, dear," she added.

"We must put off our dinner on Monday."

Kitty fetched the engagement book. She stood looking over her mother's shoulder.

"And then there's the Lathoms' party, Mama," she suggested, as her mother looked through the list of their engagements.

"We can't put off everything just because Cousin Rose is dead," said her mother sharply. She was irritated with her, Kitty knew, for the tone of relief in which she had spoken. But there were notes to be

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written. She went and wrote them at her mother's dictation.

Why is she so ready to put off all our engagements? thought Mrs Malone, watching her write. Why doesn't she enjoy going out with me any more? She glanced through the notes that her daughter brought her.

"Why don't you take more interest in things here, Kitty?" she said irritably, pushing the letters away.

"Mama, dear—" Kitty began, deprecating the old argument.

"But what is it you want to do?" her mother persisted. She had put away her embroidery; she was sitting upright, looking rather formidable.

"Your father and I only want you to do what you want to do," she continued.

"Mama, dear—" Kitty repeated. Her mother was tired; Cousin Rose's death had been a shock; and what was the use of arguing when she did not know what she wanted to do. To go to America, to live in the North and be a farmer? Anyhow it was useless to say so.

"You could help your father if it bores you helping me," said Mrs Malone. "Papa told me the other day that you never come to him now." She referred, Kitty knew, up to a monumental work upon the history of the college upon which her father was engaged. He had suggested that she should help him. Again she saw the ink flowing—she had made an awkward brush with her arm—over five generations of Oxford men, obliterating hours of her father's exquisite penmanship; and could hear him saying with his usual courteous irony, "Nature did not intend you to be a scholar, my dear," as he applied the blotting-paper.

"I know," she said guiltily. "I haven't been to Papa lately. But then there's always something—" She hesitated.

"Naturally," said Mrs Malone, "with a man in your father's position there's a great deal to be done." Kitty sat silent. They both sat silent. They both disliked this petty bickering; they both detested these recurring scenes; and yet for some reason they seemed inevitable. Kitty got up, took the letters she had written and put them in the hall.

A little pang of uneasy affection stirred Mrs Malone as she saw her go. What did she want? What was wrong? she wondered. Surely she had everything she wanted? When she compared her own girlhood with Kitty's—she smiled to herself. She could remember sitting at home on a spring evening like this up in Yorkshire miles from anywhere in the depths of the country. You could hear the beat of a horse's hoof on the road miles away. She could remember flinging open her bedroom window and looking out on the shrubs in the garden and crying, "Is this life?" And then there were the long winters and the snow. And here was Kitty living in Oxford, living in the midst of everything—what did she want then?

Kitty came back into the drawing-room and yawned very slightly, raising her hand to her face with an unconscious gesture of fatigue that touched her mother.

"Tired, Kitty?" she said. "It's been a long day, hasn't it, and you look pale."

"And you look tired too," said Kitty. Under all their bickerings they had a peculiar intimacy which made them feel as if they were one person in two different bodies; and yet they always quarrelled.

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"Go to bed, Kitty," said Mrs Malone. "There! It's striking ten."

The bells came pushing forth one after another, one on top of another, through the damp, heavy air.

"But aren't you coming to bed too, Mama?" said Kitty, standing beside her chair.

"Your father won't be back just yet," said Mrs Malone, putting on her spectacles again.

"They'll go on smoking and talking for hours and hours," Kitty protested. But she knew that it was useless to try to persuade her mother to go to bed; she always sat up for Papa. It was part of the mysterious ritual of her parents' lives. The old childish feeling of uncritical admiration for her mother came over her as she saw her sitting there indomitable, in her chair. How magnificent she is! she thought as she gave her the little perfunctory peck that was the only sign they ever gave each other outwardly of their affection. But tonight Mrs Malone put her arm round her daughter.

"Good-night, and sleep well," she said. "I don't like to see your roses faded." Kitty left the room. Mrs Malone sat still for a moment.

"But I don't know that I want her to marry Edward," she thought, seeing Edward's note lying on the table. "She ought to marry someone"—the thought of young Lord Lammermuir came into her mind—"someone who would give her more scope," she added, taking up Edward's note again. I hope this won't interfere with his work, she thought. She read it through. It was only a brief statement; he had just heard that his mother, was dead. He had had a telegram from London. Rose was dead, Mrs Malone thought; yes, she was dead. And she was just her own age. She had bright red hair, she remembered; and she wore a little black hat with a cock's feather in it, when she rode over that day. "That was the first time she met him," she thought, "the day we had the picnic on the moors."

The coffin was borne down the stairs by solemn-looking men who lurched slightly from side to side under its weight. The servants had all come up from the basement and were standing in a row in the hall. The hall was full of the smell of spring flowers, for it had been stacked with wreaths. Even though they had been carried out and placed upon the hearse, the sweet sickly smell of flowers still hung about and there were white petals on the carpet. The servants clustered round the door; Rose threw a bunch of white narcissus on the coffin as it passed out; and the family, all in deepest black, went down the steps and took their places in the carriages that were lined up behind the hearse.

The funeral started at a walking pace. Delia, getting into the second carriage with Milly and Edward, noticed that the houses opposite had all drawn their blinds in sympathy; but a servant was peeping. She sank back into the corner and tried to prevent herself from noticing things. The others, she felt, glancing at their coal-black knees, were thinking all the time of their mother. They were silent. When they got into the main road their pace quickened; the drive to the cemetery was a long one. As the procession trotted along the street Delia noticed how men raised their hats as the hearse went by. But by the time their own carriage passed the hats were on again, and people were hurrying on as usual. It was a quick spring day with passing shadows and darting rays of uncertain

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sunshine. The shops were already gay with spring clothes; she glanced at the brightly coloured dresses in the windows. But they would have to wear nothing but black all the summer.

They scarcely spoke, or only in little broken sentences, which were formal rather, as if they were already taking part in the ceremony. Somehow their relations had changed, she thought, looking at Edward in his coal-black suit opposite her. They were more considerate to each other, and a little important too, as if their mother's death had laid new responsibilities on them, so that they were now grown-up. But it came naturally to the others, she felt—they all knew how to behave; it was only she who had to make an effort, who had to conceal something that she did not want them to discover. Somehow she remained outside, and so did her father, she thought. She was careful not to be left alone in the room with him. And when Martin suddenly burst out laughing at tea, and then stopped and looked guilty she felt—that is what Papa would do, that is what I should do if we were honest.

She glanced out of the window again. Another man raised his hat—a tall man, a man in a frock coat, but no, she would not allow herself to think of Mr Parnell until the funeral was over.

At last they reached the cemetery. And directly she took her place in the little group behind the coffin and walked up the church, she was relieved to find that she was overcome by some generalised and solemn emotion. People stood up on both sides of the church and she felt their eyes on her. Then the service began. A cousin, looking completely—was "disinfected" the word she wanted?—read it. The first words struck out with a rush of extraordinary beauty. Delia, standing behind her father, noticed how he braced himself and squared his shoulders.

"I am the resurrection and the life."

Pent up as she had been all these days in the half-light of the house which smelt of spring flowers, the outspoken words filled her with glory. This she could feel genuinely; this was something that she said herself. But then, as Cousin James went on reading, something slipped. What was he trying to prove? She could not follow with her reason; she could make no sense of the argument. But in the midst of the argument came another burst of familiar beauty. "And fade away suddenly like the grass, in the morning it is green, and groweth up; but in the evening it is cut down, dried up, and withered." And again, "There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differeth from another in glory." Yes. She could feel the beauty of that too; it was like music; but then Cousin James seemed to hurry, as if he did not altogether believe what he was saying. He seemed to pass from the known to the unknown; and to have assumed a manner, in order to shroud what he was saying from notice: as if it were nonsense. What did it mean? She gave it up; either one understood or one did not understand, she thought. Her mind wandered.

But I will not think of him, she said to herself, until I go to bed tonight. She dismissed the image of Mr Parnell. She kept watching her father dab a great white pocket-handkerchief to his eyes and put it in his pocket; then he pulled it out and dabbed his eyes with it again. Then the voice stopped; he put his hand-

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kerchief finally in his pocket; and they all formed up, the little group of the family, behind the coffin and again the dark people on either side rose, and watched them and let them go first and followed after.

It was a relief to feel the soft damp air blowing its leafy smell in her face again. But again now that she was out of doors, she began to notice things. She noticed how the black funeral horses were pawing the ground; they were scraping little pits with their hooves in the yellow gravel. She remembered hearing that funeral horses came from Belgium and were very vicious. They looked vicious she thought; one of them kept tossing its head up and down and its neck was flecked with foam—but she recalled herself. They went straggling in ones and twos along a path until they reached a fresh mound of yellow earth heaped beside a pit; and there again she noticed how the grave-diggers stood at a little distance, rather behind, with their spades.

There was a pause; people kept on arriving and took up their positions, some a little higher, some a little lower than the others. She observed a poor-looking shabby woman prowling on the outskirts, and tried to think whether she were some old servant, but she could not put a name to her. Her Uncle Digby, her father's brother, stood directly opposite her, with his top-hat held like some sacred vessel between his hands the image of grave decorum. Some of the women were crying; but not the men; the men had one pose; the women had another, she observed. Then it all began again. The splendid gust of music blew through them—"Man that is born of a woman": the ceremony had renewed itself; once more they were grouped, united. The family pressed a little closer to the graveside and looked fixedly at the coffin which lay with its polish and its brass handles there in the earth to be buried for ever. It looked too new to be buried for ever. They must look at the coffin now because it was their last chance. She stared down into the grave. There lay her mother; in that coffin. She stared; her eyes dazzled, the coffin was so yellow. She was afraid that she might faint; but she must look; she must feel; it was the last chance that was left her. Earth dropped on the coffin; three pebbles fell on the hard shiny surface; and as they dropped she was possessed by a sense of something everlasting; of life mixing with death, of death becoming life. For as she looked she heard the sparrows chirping quicker and quicker; she heard omnibuses in the distance; life seemed to be getting louder and louder and coming closer and closer. . . .

"We give thee hearty thanks," said the voice, "for that it has pleased thee to deliver this our sister out of the miseries of this sinful world—"

What a lie! she cried to herself. What a damnable lie! He had robbed her of the one feeling that was genuine; he had spoilt her one moment of understanding.

She looked up. She saw Morris and Eleanor side by side; their faces were blurred; their noses were red; the tears were running down them. As for her father he was so stiff and so rigid that she had a convulsive desire to laugh aloud. Nobody can feel like that, she thought. He's overdoing it. None of us feel anything at all, she thought: we're all pretending.

Then there was a general movement; the attempt at concentration was over. People strolled off this way

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and that; there was no attempt now to form into a procession; little groups came together; people shook hands rather furtively, among the graves, and even smiled.

"How good of you to come!" said Edward, shaking hands with old Sir James Graham, who gave him a little pat on the shoulder. Ought she to go and thank Cousin Kate Malone for coming? The graves made it difficult. It was becoming a shrouded and subdued morning party among the graves. She hesitated—she did not know what she ought to do next. Her father had walked on. He apparently was expected to walk straight past everybody to his carriage with Morris and Eleanor. But she paused. She looked back. The grave-diggers had come forward; they were piling the wreaths one on top of another neatly; and the prowling woman had joined them and was stooping down to read the names on the cards.

Crosby was standing at the top of the steps holding the door open as if to welcome them when they came back. Dressed in her new black dress, she was smiling faintly, as if apologetically; still she was smiling. The hall had been swept and tidied, but there was a sickly smell of flowers, and a few white petals still stuck to the carpet. They were to have an early tea; Edward was going back to Oxford; and when they came into the drawing-room the blinds were up, the sun struck on the Dutch cabinet and upon Mrs Pargiter toying with her roses. The room was full of flowers; it was cheerful in an unfamiliar way; a cross, Delia thought as she came in, between Christmas day and Sunday.

They talked intermittently as they waited for the tea. The Colonel had gone to his study, and they sat round the table talking about the funeral, and who had been there and had not been there, much, Delia thought, as if it had been a party.

"Who was that queer woman prowling about in the background?" she asked. "It wasn't old Biddy Dawes, was it?" But none of the others had seen her; perhaps she ought not to have noticed her either.

"I didn't see Aunt Eugénie, did you?" said Eleanor. "No," said Morris, "Uncle Digby said she had a cold. But she sent her love."

There was a pause.

"What a beautiful wreath the servants sent!" said Edward.

"Yes," said Milly. "Wasn't it nice of them?"

"But they wouldn't let Jane subscribe because she had only been here three weeks," said Delia; the remark sounded a little wrong. Nobody smiled.

"We must find a book to give Cousin James," said Morris. He looked vaguely at the bookcase where there were bound copies of standard works.

"Or perhaps something that Mama had used?" said Eleanor. She glanced at the writing-table. Martin's walrus met her eye. She looked away.

"I thought he read the service so beautifully," said Edward.

Delia thought to herself, I suppose he did; but what was it all about? The others, she supposed, had understood it. And now, she thought, what difference will it make to me—now that it has actually happened?

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Can I go to Papa and say—she stopped herself. She would have to wait; perhaps after they had been away—in two or three weeks. She looked round the room restlessly. It was unfamiliar. It was full of flowers. People had sent flowers and Crosby must have arranged them. She had put tight little bunches of flowers on shelves, on bookcases, on tables where they never had flowers as a rule. But there was something odd about a big bunch of flowers—lilacs were they?—on the table in the front room. She kept looking at the flowers; with the surface of her mind she noticed the plume like purple bunches, making a little reflection in the white china.

Then Crosby came in and unfolded the table for tea. As it was the day of the funeral they were having tea in the back room.

"Who brought those flowers, Crosby?" Eleanor asked. Her eye too had been caught by the purple lilac.

"Lady Pargiter, Miss," said Crosby. She stooped and lit the kettle. Then she turned to Eleanor. "Her ladyship came as soon as you were gone, Miss," she said.

(But why can't you talk in your ordinary voice? Delia wondered.)

"She wouldn't come upstairs; she sat in the kitchen," said Crosby. She looked at the vase as she turned to go. "The big Venetian vase seemed to be cracked, Miss; so her ladyship used the milk-jug," she added apologetically. That was what was odd, Delia thought. The flowers were in a milk-jug.

"They look very nice anyhow," said Eleanor. Her lips were slightly contracted; in any other circumstances she would have laughed. She prevented herself. But Morris laughed outright.

"How like Aunt Eugénie!" he exclaimed.

Crosby looked at him rather startled. It was the first crack in the solemnity of the day. Then they all smiled.

"First she says she's got a cold; and then she comes all the way here," he said.

He drew up to the tea-table.

"And sits in the kitchen," said Edward.

"And uses the milk-jug," said Milly.

They liked telling stories about Aunt Eugénie. They all felt that they were beginning to live again, as they laughed at Aunt Eugénie's doings.

"Mama was very fond of her," said Eleanor. She still felt it necessary to bring everything back into relation with her mother.

"Yes," said Delia. She thought how her mother had brightened that evening when she spoke of Aunt Eugénie.

"Yes," she said, drawing up to the table, "Mama was very fond of her." She saw again the jugs in the passage, and herself as she stood there repeating some odd rambling story about Uncle Horace and the dining-room door. Had that happened only four days ago? It seemed more like a century.

"The kettle's boiling, Eleanor," she said.

"I must remember to write and thank her," said Eleanor, turning to the kettle.

She glanced at the writing-table as she did so. What masses of letters she would have to answer! There they were, in a thick bundle, with an elastic band round it. Her paper case was full of new notepaper with deep

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glossy black borders.

That's my writing-table now, she thought to herself. I must take Mama's place now. There was a little pile of tradesmen's books on the table—a golden cow was stamped on one of them. She felt a sudden rush of longing for the woman who had sat there so often, adding up the weekly books, for the woman who had been her mother.

If only she would come back to me, she thought. She felt very young, forlorn and inadequate.

My youth is over, she thought as she turned to pour out the tea.

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104 Welsh accent largely; he was a charming ruffian. He was as supple as an eel, she knew; but when he talked like that, in that sing-song, which reminded her of Welsh valleys. . . . But he had cheated her at every point. There was a hole you could poke your finger through in the plaster.

"Look at that, Mr Duffus, there—" she said, stooping and poking her finger. But there was something romantic to her about the small builder; with his pocket-book and his pencil;—he was licking his pencil. She loved going to his yard with him and seeing him size up planks and bricks; she loved his technical words for things.

"And now we'll go upstairs," she said. He seemed to her like a fly struggling to haul itself up out of a saucer. It was touch and go with small employers like Duffus; they might haul themselves up and become the Judds of their day and send their sons to the Varsity; or on the other hand they might fall in and then— He had a wife and five children; she had seen them in the room behind the shop, playing with reels of cotton on the floor. And she always hoped that they would ask her. . . . But now for the top floor where old Mrs Potter lay bedridden. She knocked; she called out in a loud cheerful voice, "May we come in?"

There was no answer. The old woman was stone deaf; so they went in. There she was, as usual, doing nothing whatever, propped up in the corner of her bed.

"I've brought Mr Duffus to look at your ceiling," Eleanor shouted.

The old woman looked up and began plucking with her hands like a large tousled ape. She looked at them wildly, suspiciously.

105 "The ceiling, Mr Duffus," said Eleanor. She pointed to a yellow stain on the ceiling. The house had only been built five years; and yet everything wanted repairing. Duffus threw open the window and leant out. Mrs Potter clutched hold of Eleanor's hand. She seemed to cling to her, as if she suspected that they were going to hurt her.

"We've come to look at your ceiling," Eleanor repeated very loudly. But the words conveyed nothing. The old woman went off into a whining plaint; the words ran themselves together into a chant that was half plaint, half curse. Eleanor had heard it so often, it was always the same thing. Here she still was; if only the Lord would take her. Every night, she said, she implored Him to let her go. All her children were dead.

"When I wake in the morning . . ." she began.

"Yes, yes, yes, Mrs Potter," Eleanor tried to soothe her; but her hands were firmly grasped.

"I pray Him to let me go," Mrs Potter continued.

"It's the leaves in the gutter," said Duffus, popping his head in again.

"And the pain—" Mrs Potter stretched out her hands; they were like the gnarled roots of a tree.

"Yes, yes," said Eleanor. "But there's a leak; it's not only the dead leaves," she said to Duffus.

Duffus put his head out again.

"But we're going to make you more comfortable," Eleanor shouted to the old woman. Now she was cringing and fawning; now she had pressed her hand to her lips.

Duffus drew his head in again.

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106 "Have you found out what's wrong?" Eleanor said to him sharply. He was entering something in his pocket-book. She longed to go. Mrs Potter was asking her to feel her shoulder. She felt her shoulder. Her hand was still grasped. There was medicine on the table; Miriam Parrish came every week. Why do we do it? she asked herself as Mrs Potter went on talking; the words ran themselves into a kind of chant. Why force her to live? she asked, looking at the medicine on the table. She could stand it no longer. She withdrew her hand.

"Good-bye, Mrs Potter," she shouted. She was insincere; she was hearty. "We're going to mend your ceiling," she shouted as she shut the door. Mrs Groves waddled down in advance of her to show the sink in the scullery. A wisp of yellow hair hung down behind her dirty ears. If I had to do this every day of my life, Eleanor thought, as she followed them down into the scullery, I should become a bag of bones like Miriam; with a string of beads. . . . And what's the use of that, she thought, stooping to smell the sink in the scullery.

"Well, Duffus," she said, facing him when the inspection was over, with the smell of drains still in her nose. "What d'you propose to do about it?"

Her anger was rising; it was his fault largely. He had swindled her. But as she stood facing him and observed his little underfed body, and how his bow tie had worked up over his collar, she felt uncomfortable.

"What do you mean to do about it?" she repeated.

As he began his usual excuses—she had hurried him; he had been let down by Jones & Hawkins—she felt that she was going to lose her temper.

"If you can't make a good job of it," she said curtly, "I shall employ somebody else." She adopted the tone of the Colonel's daughter; the upper middle-class tone that she detested. She saw him turn sullen before her eyes. But she rubbed it in.

"You ought to be ashamed of it," she told him. He was impressed she could see. "Good morning," she said briefly.

107 The ingratiating smile was not produced for her benefit again, she observed. But you have to bully them or else they despise you, she thought as Mrs Toms let her out, and once more she observed the slant in her apron. A crowd of children stood round staring at Duffus's pony. But none of them dared stroke the pony's nose, she noticed.

She was late. She looked at her watch. The appointment with Dickson must be scamped, she thought as she hurried along the little street. Her father expected her; she must be home for lunch. She broke into her usual ambling trot. The movement was a relief; the movement seemed to break up the disagreeable crust; and the grasp of the old woman's hand; there was no time to think as she jogged down the misty grey street; she must catch her bus. She had promised to meet Celia outside the Law Courts at two-thirty; and there was her bus. But it was moving. . . . she ran along the pavement. Shopping women got in her way; she dashed into the road, waving her hand, among the carts and horses. The conductor saw her; he curved his arm round her and hauled her up. She swung onto

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the footboard as the bus was moving. A glow of triumph came over her. Yes, she had caught her bus.

108 She pitched down between two elderly women who moved grudgingly to give her room. They disapproved of her, she felt. She was panting slightly; her hair she supposed was coming down, her face was red with running. But she did not mind; she had caught her bus. She looked round; they were all settled, middle-aged, disapproving rather. She always felt that she was the youngest person in an omnibus. She always felt that all the other people in an omnibus were mature; and had made up their minds; whereas she was much younger, and less assured. Yet to-day, for some reason, she felt that she was grown-up. She did not mind, she thought, putting her hand to her hair, if they did think her untidy. She could hold her own against Judd. A committee meeting, she thought, settling herself more comfortably, for there was plenty of room, was an interesting thing, a very interesting thing. Getting one's own way; finding out what other people were like; Judd saying he wanted to send his boy to the Varsity; Mrs Lazenby wishing he'd pick his teeth at home, and writing to her cousin Sir John—she smiled, she glanced out of the window as the bus plodded on. There were public-houses, private houses, big shops, little shops; and underneath them, she thought, pipes, wires, drains; twining and coiling in and out under the surface of the road. And then on top? she looked out. Well, there was a public-house; an eating-house and a church—she watched them pass. Human beings formed themselves together; like bees in a swarm; she thought of the palpitating dark-brown shiny mass that hung from an apple tree in the garden in Devonshire. Then, how exciting, she thought, to get one's own hands (she curled up her bare hands that were sticky with the heat of running) to get one's own hands, she repeated, on that mass. She looked down the long avenue of the Bayswater Road. A church with a filigree spire rose silhouetted in the midst of the houses. That always seemed to her odd; the church in the midst of the houses. Who built that church with the filigree spire in the Bayswater Road? she wondered. And why? There's always a public-house and a library and a church, she told herself—

But the omnibus stopped. With a little start she cut off some vague picture that was forming in her mind and jumped out. She began to walk quickly up Melrose Place. She still felt the change of atmosphere when she came back that used to make them call her "broody" in the old days. Only now she was much happier than she used to be then; living with her father that she had her hands on things; she was not broody any longer. She felt vigorous and young. She noticed everything freshly after Devonshire. She looked down the long many-pillared vista of Abercorn Terrace. It was all going on as usual. The houses all looked highly respectable; with their pillars and their front gardens; in every front room, she noticed as she hurried past, there was a table laid with silver and china; in every front room she seemed to see a parlourmaid's arm sweep over the table, laying it for luncheon, as she went by. In several rooms they were already sitting down to luncheon; she could see them between the tent-shaped opening made by the curtains. She would

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be just a little late for her own luncheon, she thought as she ran up the front steps and fitted her latch-key in the door. Then, as if someone were speaking, words formed in her mind. "Something pretty, something to wear." She stopped with her key in the lock. Maggie's birthday; her father's present; she had completely forgotten it. She paused.

"But if I don't get it he'll have nothing to give her," she said.

She turned and broke into her jog-trot again. Lamley's... perhaps Lamley's would have something that would do. "Something pretty—something to wear"—the words jingled, as she ran down the Avenue to the shop. She seemed to remember cards of cheap jewellery hanging in the window; a nephew of Mrs Lamley's was branching out. She saw the shop across the road on a little island of shops. Yes, there were necklaces hanging on a rail in the window among toys and boxes of pink notepaper. She burst into the shop, making the bell tinkle. She could see Mrs Lamley having dinner in the back room. When she saw Eleanor she came herself, though she had not finished her mouthful.

"Oh, Mrs Lamley, I want a present for my little niece—I mean cousin," she said, panting slightly as Mrs Lamley appeared, wiping her mouth behind the counter. "Sir Digby's little girl—you remember," she added, for this was the kind of thing that Mrs Lamley did remember; scraps of gossip about the Pargiters were her favourite food. And Mrs Lamley looked round deprecating the cheapness of her shop; afraid that they had nothing...

"Yes, yes—those necklaces," said Eleanor, pointing. "That'll do nicely," she said, and took a blue necklace flecked with gold spots and thrust it in her bag, just as it was, "because I'm very late as it is, Mrs Lamley," she said, counting out the price, and waving aside the offer of string and brown paper that Mrs Lamley thought fitting. She started back.

This is life, she thought as she began to trot down Melrose Avenue. For the moment it seemed to her extraordinarily odd; but it was true; trotting up and down streets to buy necklaces; saying, "No, don't bother about the string—I'm late as it is." This was life. Anyhow she enjoyed it; the sky was bright; and she felt strong and fresh; and this is what's actually happening, she said as she fitted her key into the door again; there were sparrows in the garden. A faint smell of cooking was in the hall; she felt hungry; she liked the look of the hall; with letters waiting and a book from the library—she had not time to see which book they had sent. And the roar of the gong, which Crosby began to beat as she came in, quickened her sense of the moving, changing, perpetually forming and reforming substance which she had swept together and held higgledy-piggledy in her arms to think about, she thought, as she ran upstairs, when I brush my teeth.

"Miss Elanor won't be a minute," said the Colonel as Crosby brought in the dishes. "Leave the covers on." He stood with his back to the fireplace waiting for her. Yes, he thought, I don't see why not. "I don't see why not," he repeated, looking at the dish-cover. Mira was on the scenes again; the other fellow had

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turned out, as he knew he would, a bad egg. And what provision was he to make for Mira? What was he to do about it? It had struck him that he would like to put the whole thing before Eleanor. Why not after all? She's not a child any longer, he thought; and he didn't like this business of—of—shutting things up in drawers. She would be sure to find out some time or other. And she wasn't a silly sort of a girl who— But no. He felt some shyness at the thought of telling his own daughter.

"Here she is," he said abruptly to Crosby, who stood waiting mutely behind him.

No, no, no, he said to himself with sudden conviction, as Eleanor came in. I can't do it. For some reason when he saw her he realised that he could not tell her. And after all, he thought, seeing how bright-cheeked, how unconcerned she looked, she has her own life to live. A spasm of jealousy passed through him. She's got her own affairs to think about, he thought as they sat down.

She pushed a necklace across the table towards him. "Hullo, what's that?" he said.

"Maggie's present, Papa," she said. "The best I could do. . . I'm afraid it's rather cheap."

"Yes; that'll do very nicely," he said, glancing at it absently. "Just what she'll like," he added, shoving it to one side. He began to carve the chicken.

She was very hungry; she was still rather breathless. She felt a little "spun round on a pivot," as she put it to herself. What did you spin things round on? she wondered, helping herself to bread sauce. The scene had changed so often that morning; and every scene required a different assembly, a different adjustment; bringing this to the front; sinking that to the depths. And now she felt a nothing; hungry merely; merely a chicken-eater; blank. But as she ate the sense of her father's presence imposed itself. She liked his solidity; his sober good sense, as he sat opposite her munching his chicken methodically. What had he been doing, she wondered, looking affectionately at him. Investing money? Taking shares out of one company and putting them in another? He roused himself.

"Well, how did the Committee behave itself?" he asked. She told him, exaggerating her triumph rather; about her scrap with Judd.

"That's right. Stand up to 'em, Nell. Don't let yourself be sat on," he said. He had a curious paternal vanity; he was proud of her in his own way; and she liked him to be proud of her. She sketched the state of affairs about the money; she respected his opinion immensely. At the same time she concealed a good deal from him; she did not mention Duffus and Rigby Cottages. She never told him what a bad investment that had been; she never got a penny interest on her money, it all went on repairs. He had no sympathy with people who were foolish about money. She turned the conversation to Morris and his case at the Law Courts. It was his first big case; after all these years it seemed as if he were beginning to make his way, at last. She thought he might have come to hear Morris speak. She looked at her watch again. Her sister-in-law Celia had told her to meet her at the Law Courts at two o'clock sharp.

"I shall have to hurry," she said.

"Ah, but these lawyer chaps always know how to spin things out," said the Colonel. "Who's the Judge?"

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"Sanders Curry," said Eleanor.

"Then it'll last till Domesday," said the Colonel.

"Which Court's he sitting in?" he asked.

Eleanor did not know. She had meant to read the report in *The Times*, but she had forgotten.

"Here, Crosby—" said the Colonel. He sent Crosby for *The Times*. He began opening and turning the great sheets with his clumsy fingers as Eleanor swallowed her tart. By the time she had poured out coffee he had found out in which court the case of *Wilson v. Blair* was being heard.

"And you're going to the City, Papa?" she said as she put down her cup.

"Yes. To a meeting," he said. He loved going to the City, whatever he did there.

"Odd it should be Curry who's trying the case," she said, rising. They had dined with him not long ago in a dreary great house somewhere off Queens Gate.

"D'you remember that party?" she said, getting up. "He collects old oak."

"All shams I suspect," said her father. "Don't hurry," he expostulated. "Take a cab, Nell—if you want any change—" he began, fumbling in his pocket for silver. He often supplemented her allowance with half-crowns in this way. As she watched him Eleanor felt the old childish feeling that his pockets were bottomless silver mines from which half-crowns could be dug; what his income was now, she had no idea.

"Well then," she said, taking the coins, "we shall meet at tea."

"No," he reminded her, "I'm going round by the Digby's."

He took the necklace in his large hairy hand. It looked a little cheap, Eleanor was afraid.

"And what about a box for this, eh?" he asked.

"Crosby, find a box for the necklace," said Eleanor. And Crosby, suddenly radiating importance, hurried off to the basement.

"It'll be dinner then," she said to her father. That'll mean, she thought with relief, that I needn't be back for tea.

"Yes, dinner," he said. He held a spill of paper in his hand which he was applying to the end of his cigar. He sucked. A little puff of smoke rose from the cigar. She liked the smell of cigars. She stood for a moment and drew it in.

"And give my love to Aunt Eugénie," she said. He nodded as he puffed at his cigar.

It was a treat to take a hansom—and there, coming along the street, was a hansom. She hailed it. It was an extravagance to take a hansom all the way to the Law Courts, she thought, as the reins tightened, but it saved fifteen minutes. She leant back in the corner, with a little sigh of content, as the flaps clicked above her knees. For a minute her mind was completely vacant. She enjoyed the peace, the silence, the rest from exertion as she sat there in the corner of the cab. She felt detached, a spectator, as it trotted along. The morning had been such a muddle; one thing on top of another. Now, until she reached the Law Courts, she could sit and look. It was a long way; and the horse was a plodding horse, a sturdy horse. It kept up its

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steady jog-trot all down the Bayswater Road. There was very little traffic; people were still at luncheon. A soft grey mist filled up the distance; the bells jingled; the houses passed. She ceased to notice what houses they were passing. She half shut her eyes, and then, involuntarily, as if it were a scene from a magic lantern, she saw her own hand take a letter from the hall table. When? It must have been that very morning. What had she done with it? Put it in her bag? Yes. There it was, unopened; a letter from Martin in India. She would read it as they drove along. It was written on very thin paper with the regimental crest on top. It was rather difficult to read Martin's little hand. She glanced quickly through, to make sure that he was all right. It was longer than usual; it was about an adventure with somebody called Renton. Who was Renton? She could not remember. "We started at dawn," she read.

She looked out of the window. They were being held up by traffic at the Marble Arch. Carriages were coming out of the Park. A horse pranced; but the coachman had him well in hand.

She read again: "I found myself alone in the middle of the jungle. . . ."

But who were you with; and what were you doing? she asked, turning back to the beginning. She was always afraid that Martin would get himself into trouble one of these days. And so he had, apparently. He had gone shooting with this man, Renton; they had separated; and he had got lost. She glanced up; the cab was going along Oxford Street she noted; not down Piccadilly.

"I realised that I had lost my way; and the sun was sinking," she read.

"The sun was sinking. . . ." Eleanor repeated, glancing ahead of her down Oxford Street. A jungle was a very thick wood, she supposed; made of stunted little trees; dark green in colour. Well. There was Martin alone, and the sun was sinking. What happened next? "I thought it better to stay where I was." So he stood in the midst of little trees alone, lost in the jungle; and the sun was sinking. The street before her lost its detail; it became generalised. It must have been cold, she thought, when the sun sank. She read again. Yes, he had to make a fire. "I looked in my pocket and found that I had only two matches and a few pages of the Government order. . . ." He had only two matches. Well? "The first match went out. That's done it," I said to myself. She saw a heap of dry stick and Martin alone watching the match go out. "Then I lit the other, and by sheer luck it did the trick." The paper began to burn; the twigs caught; they blazed up. She skipped on in her anxiety to reach the end. . . . every few minutes he had to collect more sticks. . . . the difficulty was to keep awake—"once I thought I heard voices shouting, but they died away."

"They died away!" said Eleanor aloud.

They had stopped at Chancery Lane. An old woman was being helped across the road by a policeman; but the road was a jungle.

"They died away," she said. "And then?"

"... I climbed a tree. . . . I saw the track. . . . the sun was rising. . . . They had given me up for dead."

The cab stopped. For a moment Eleanor sat still. Where was she? She saw nothing but stunted little trees, and her brother looking at the sun rising over

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the jungle. The sun was rising; she sat still. But here she was at the Law Courts. Yes. Here she was. She got out and paid the driver. The Law Courts looked cold, stony and funereal, but quite unreal as she went in. It was the second match that did it, she said to herself as she walked down a corridor.

The corridors were crowded with barristers in gowns and wigs carrying papers. They were diving in and out of the swing doors. There was nothing to tell her which Court was Curry's. She wandered up and down corridors at random.

"Oh, there you are!" cried a little woman in furs, who was standing by one of the doors.

"I had quite given you up. I was just going in." There was a note of reproach in Celia's voice, as if she did not like Eleanor to be late on an occasion like this.

They pushed through the swing doors into the Court where the case of Wilson and Blair was being tried. It seemed very dark and crowded at first. Men in wigs and gowns were getting up and sitting down and coming in and going out like a flock of birds settling here and there on a field. They all looked unfamiliar; she could not see Morris. She looked about her, trying to find him.

"There he is," Celia whispered.

One of the barristers in the front row turned his head. It was Morris; but how odd he looked in his yellow wig! His glance passed over them without any sign of recognition. Nor did she smile at him; the solemn sallow atmosphere forbade personalities; there was something ceremonial about it all. From where she sat she could see his face in profile; the wig squared his forehead, and gave him a framed look, like a picture. She had never seen him to such advantage; she had never seen him look so handsome, with such a brow, with such a nose. She glanced round. They all looked like pictures; all the barristers looked emphatic, cut out, like eighteenth-century portraits hung upon a wall. They were still rising and settling, laughing, talking. . . . Suddenly a door was thrown open. The usher demanded silence for his lordship. There was silence; everybody stood up; and the Judge came in. He made one bow and took his seat under the Lion and the Unicorn. Eleanor felt a little thrill of awe run through her. That was old Curry. But how transformed! Last time she had seen him he was sitting at the head of a dinner-table; a long yellow strip of embroidery went rippling down the table; and he had taken her round the drawing-room to look at his old oak. But now, there he was, awful, magisterial, in his robes.

Eleanor listened. A barrister had risen. She tried to follow what the man with a big nose was saying. The case was between a shipping company and a dock; that she knew; but she had not had time to read the report. It was difficult to pick it up now. She listened, however. Then another barrister rose—a chicken-breasted little man, wearing gold pince-nez—not very impressive, and cuffs and trousers looked odd, she thought, under a gown. He was reading some document; then he too began to argue. She could understand parts of what he was saying; though how it bore on the case she did not know. When was Morris going to speak, she wondered? Not yet apparently. The other man got up; he spoke at great length too. As her

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father had said, these lawyer chaps knew how to spin things out. There had been no need to hurry over luncheon; an omnibus would have done just as well. She fixed her eyes on Morris. He was cracking some joke with the sandy man next to him. Those were his cronies, she thought; this was his life. She remembered his passion for the Bar as a boy. She remembered his writing what he called "an opinion" for Crosby's brother who had fallen off a ladder. It was she who had talked Papa round; one morning she had taken her life in her hand and gone to his study. . . . but now, to her excitement, Morris himself got up.

She felt her sister-in-law stiffen with nervousness and clasp her little bag tightly. Morris looked very tall, and very black and white as he began. One hand was on the edge of his gown. How well she knew that gesture of Morris's, she thought—grasping something, so that you saw the white scar where he had cut himself bathing. But she did not recognise the other gesture—the way he flung his arm out—not at all. That was something he had learnt in the Courts. And his voice was unfamiliar. But every now and then as he warmed to his speech, there was a tone in his voice that made her smile; it was the way he spoke at home. She could not help half turning to her sister-in-law as if to say, How like Morris! But Celia was looking with absolute fixity ahead of her at her husband. Eleanor, too, tried to fix her mind upon the argument. He spoke with extraordinary clearness, she felt; he spaced his words beautifully. Suddenly the Judge interrupted:

"Do I understand you to hold, Mr Pargiter. . . ?" he said in urbane yet awful tones; and Eleanor was thrilled to see how instantly Morris stopped short; how respectfully he bent his head as the Judge spoke.

But will he know the answer? she thought, shifting in her seat with nervousness lest he might break down, like a child at lessons. But he had the answer at his finger-ends. She was immensely relieved. Without hurry or flutter he opened a book; found his place; read out a passage, upon which old Curry nodded, and made a note in the great volume that lay open in front of him.

"How well he did that!" Eleanor whispered. Her sister-in-law nodded; but she still grasped her bag. Now Eleanor felt that she could relax. Morris clearly was master of the situation. He knew his job. She only wished that she had read up the case so that she could take his points more exactly. She wished she had listened more carefully in the old days when he was always ready to expound points of law, reading cases aloud out of the paper. But they had gone such different ways. He had married; they always took the children down to old Mrs Chinnery in Dorsetshire in the holidays. She glanced round her. Barristers kept coming in and out. They stood leaning against the wall of the Court. It was an odd mixture of solemnity and licence, she thought. In the pale top light all their faces looked parchment-coloured; all their features seemed cut out. They had lit the gas. She gazed at the Judge himself. He was now lying back in his great carved chair under the Lion and the Unicorn listening. He looked infinitely sad and wise, as if words had been beating upon him for centuries. Now he opened his heavy eyes, wrinkled his forehead, and the little hand that emerged frailly from the enormous cuff wrote a few words in

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the great volume. Then again he lapsed with half-shut eyes into his eternal vigil over the strife of unhappy human beings. She could not help being impressed; at the same time this was the man—she looked at him—who was always taken in by furniture dealers. "This I picked up at Whitby," he had said. And it was a sham.

But now Morris sat down. His speech was over. He turned to whisper to his cronies again. They cracked some joke. These are his friends, she thought; this is his life. It was something she had no part in. Celia had relaxed her grasp upon the hand-bag. She too began looking about the Court.

"Chivers-Dixon," she murmured to Eleanor, as a large white-faced man came in, glanced round the Court and went out again. Who was Chivers-Dixon? Eleanor had no notion. A great figure in the legal world apparently. Another barrister was now speaking. But there could be no disloyalty now in giving up the arduous attempt to follow. Celia, it was true, still leant forward with her round cat's face crinkled in a frown. But how far could Celia, with her four small children and the perennial difficulty about maids and nurses, follow the points of a legal argument, Eleanor wondered. She was jealous for a moment. She had always wished that Morris could have married someone—someone, she thought, more up to his weight. She was not very competent—Celia. He had to work terribly hard; he was getting to look quite elderly. She sighed. She leant back against the hard wooden seat and let the tide of oblivion flow over her as it had done in the hansom cab. She must wait a little longer, she supposed. Scenes from her morning began to form themselves; to obtrude themselves. Judd at the Committee; her father reading the paper; the old woman plucking at her hand; the parlourmaid sweeping the silver over the table; and Martin lighting his second match in the jungle. . . .

She became restless. She looked surreptitiously at her watch. Would Celia think her very remiss if she went now? Morris was not going to speak again apparently. The Judge was lying back like a doomed man against the arm of his chair. His cheeks ran in heavy folds as if they were cast in iron. This would go on for hours, no doubt. She rose and whispered: "I'm going."

Her sister-in-law made a little murmur, perhaps of protest; she at any rate was going to stay till the end. But Eleanor made her way as silently as she could through the swing doors, out into the street.

The uproar, the confusion, the space of the Strand came upon her with a shock of relief. She must have been getting very cramped, she thought, as she felt herself expand. It was still daylight here; a rush, a stir, a turmoil of variegated life came racing down the street. There was no need to try to concentrate upon arguments any more. She seemed, after her concentration, to be dissipated, tossed about. And she remembered with a start of pleasure that she need not hurry; she could saunter, looking about her. She wandered along the Strand, looking with delight at the racing street; at the shops full of bright chains and leather bags; at the white-faced churches; at irregular jagged roofs laced across and across with wires. Above was the dazzle of a watery but gleaming sky. The wind

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blew in her face. She breathed in a gulp of fresh wet air. And that man, she thought, thinking of the dark little Court and its cut-out faces, has to sit there all day, every day. She saw Sanders Curry again, lying back in his great chair, with his face falling in folds of iron. There they sat day after day, she thought, arguing points of law. How could Morris stand it? But he had always wanted to go to the Bar.

Cabs and vans and omnibuses streamed past; they seemed to rush the air into her face; they splashed the mud on to the pavement. People jostled and hustled and she quickened her pace so as not to get in their way. She was stopped by a van turning down one of the little steep streets that led to the river. She looked up and saw the clouds moving between the roofs, dark clouds, rain-swollen; wandering, indifferent clouds. She walked on.

Again she was stopped at the entrance to Charing Cross station. The sky was wide at that point. She saw a file of birds. She noticed them, flying high, flying together; crossing the sky. She watched them. Again she walked on. People on foot, people in cabs were being sucked in like straws round the piers of a bridge; she had to wait. Cabs piled with boxes went past her.

Going abroad? she said to herself. She envied them. She wished she were going abroad; to Italy, to India. . . . Then she felt vaguely that something out-of-the-way was happening. The paper boys were dealing out papers with unusual rapidity at the gates. Men were snatching them and opening them and reading them as they walked on. Had anything happened? She looked at a placard that was crumpled across a boy's legs. "Death" was written in very large black letters.

Who's dead? she asked. Then the placard blew straight, and she read one word: "Parnell."

Dead . . . she repeated. "Parnell." She was dazed for a moment. How could he be dead—Parnell? She bought a paper. They said so. . . .

"Parnell is dead!" she said aloud. She looked up and saw the sky again; then down into the street. So that was what they were all rushing to buy! A man was pointing at the news with his forefinger. She felt that they were gloating over it. But how could he be dead? It was like something fading in the sky.

She walked slowly along towards Trafalgar Square, holding the paper in her hand. She felt two feelings in conflict; he had escaped them; they were gloating. She had only seen him once by the Houses of Parliament getting into a cab, a man in a frock-coat with a white flower in his button-hole. Now he had disappeared, leaving them mysteriously; and they were all buying papers, to read about his death.

She crossed into Trafalgar Square.

What will this mean to Delia? she asked herself. She stopped by the fountain in Trafalgar Square, and looked down into the large basin full of water. The water rippled black as the wind ruffled it. There were reflections in the water, branches and a pale strip of sky. What a dream, she murmured; what a dream it all is. But Delia had cared. She turned. She must find her; a strong wish to be with her came over her. She hailed a cab. It was one of those extraordinary passions that nobody could argue about. She had left them all. . . .

"Off Southampton Row," she said to the cabman. "I'll stop you when we get there" . . . she had left them all for this man. She leant over the flaps of the cab,

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looking out. This part of London always looked strange and rather sinister to her. For the cause, she said to herself. The streets they were driving through were horribly poor; and not only poor, she thought, but vicious. She compared them with Notting Hill. Here was the vice, the obscenity, the reality of London. It was exciting. It was lurid in the mixed evening light. Lamps were being lit. Paper-boys were crying, Parnell . . . Parnell. . . . She held up her hand. She stopped the cab opposite a little row of posts in an alley. She got out and made her way into the Square.

The sound of the traffic was dulled. Here it was very silent. In the October afternoon, with dead leaves falling, the old faded Square looked dingy and decrepit and full of mist. It was all strange to her; nobody she knew lived in this part of London. The old houses were let out in offices, to societies, to people whose names were pinned up on the door-posts. The whole neighbourhood seemed to her foreign and sinister. She came to the old Queen Anne doorway with its heavy carved eyebrows and pressed the bell at the top of six or seven bells. Names were written over them, sometimes only on visiting-cards. Nobody came. She pushed the door open and went in; she mounted up wooden stairs with carved banisters, that seemed to have been degraded from their past dignity. Jugs of milk with bills under them stood in the deep window-seats. Some of the panes were broken. Outside Delia's door, at the top, there was a milk-jug too, but it was empty. Her card was fixed by a drawing-pin to a panel. She knocked and waited. There was no sound. She turned the handle. The door was locked. She stood for a moment listening. A little window at the side gave on to the square. Pigeons were crooning on the tree-tops. The traffic hummed far off; she could just hear paper-boys crying; the leaves were falling. She turned. There was no sound in the room.

Delia must be out, she decided. It was no use waiting; she would take a turn round the Square and come back and try again. She went out and strolled along the neighbouring streets. They were all very shabby and unfamiliar. Children had chalked the pavement into squares; women were leaning out of the upper windows. The rooms were let out to single gentlemen only. There were cards in them which said "Furnished Apartments" or "Bed and Breakfast." She guessed at the life that went on behind those thick yellow curtains. This was the purlieu in which her sister lived, she thought, turning; she must often come back this way at night alone. Then she went back to the Square and climbed the stairs and rattled at the door again. But there was no sound within. She stood for a moment watching the leaves fall; she heard the paper-boys crying and the pigeons crooning in the tree-tops. Take two coos Taffy, take two coos Taffy, take . . . And then a leaf fell.

"Hi!" the Colonel shouted as his cab passed Charing Cross Station. "Stop!" He struck his hand through the little trap-door in the roof. He had seen the placard with Parnell's name on it as they passed. The cab stopped. He leant out and took a paper from a newsboy.

"Parnell!" he exclaimed, as he fumbled for his glasses. "Parnell dead, by Jove!"

The cab trotted on. He read the news two or three

The Years—79

124 times over. He looked for details but there were no details; so he read it again. He's dead, he said, taking off his glasses. A shock of something like relief, of something that had a tinge of triumph in it, went through him as he leant back in the corner. Well, he said to himself, he's dead—that unscrupulous adventurer—that agitator who had done all the mischief, that man . . . Some feeling connected with his own daughter here formed in him; he could not say exactly what he felt about it. He frowned. Anyhow he's dead now, he thought. And how old was he? He looked at the paper. Only forty-six. And how had he died? It was very sudden. Had he killed himself? It wouldn't be surprising. . . . Anyhow he was dead and that was an end of it. He sat holding the paper crumpled in one hand, a flower wrapped in tissue paper in the other, as the cab drove down Whitehall. He could remember the whole business from start to finish. He could remember—he looked out; they were passing the House of Commons; they were selling papers there too—how it all began. It seemed only the other day. . . . One could respect him, though, he thought, as the cab passed the House of Commons, which was more than could be said for some of the other fellows. He was a good fighter; he wasn't one of your windbags, anyhow . . . and there'd been a lot of nonsense talked about the divorce case. A lot of humbug, he thought. He looked out. The cab was driving very near a certain street where he used to stop and look about him years ago. He turned and looked to the right. But a man in public life can't afford to do those things, he thought—it was just down there. He gave a little nod as the cab passed on. And now she's written to ask me for money, he thought. She wanted him to set her up in a little house in the suburbs. She'd lost all her looks, he was thinking; she had grown very stout; looked as if she'd knocked about a bit—gone to pieces—poor thing. Well, he could afford to be generous. His affairs were prosperous at the moment. He put on his glasses again and read the City news. Parnell's death coming now would make very little difference, he thought. If he'd lived, and the scandal had died down, as it would, things might have been very different. He looked up. The cab was going the long way round as usual. He watched the way the driver was taking.

"Left!" he shouted. "Left!" as the driver, as they always did, took the wrong turning.

"That'll do," he said impatiently, and jumped out at the corner of Browne Street.

125 No driver ever found his way there at the first shot. But it's becoming much more respectable, he thought as he paid the fare. Once it had been a positive slum; but Eugénie had shown her usual cleverness. She had made Digby buy two tumble-down lodging-houses for a mere song, and now it looked—there the house was, with its nice window curtains and all the rest—quite the sort of house where a man in Digby's position could live. People were beginning to like these old-fashioned houses. The value must have gone up considerably, he thought, as he stood on the doorstep and noted the neatness of the brickwork. "Had it re-painted," he said to himself; they must have spent quite a lot of money on it, he thought as he waited for the door to open, and they couldn't have much to spare with the three boys to educate and the two little girls. Here the door opened. An Italian manservant in rather seedy evening-dress let him in.

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126 Why can't she get a decent parlour maid? he thought as he took off his coat. The Italian manservant always seemed to be finishing his dinner. He took him up to the drawing-room and said he would fetch her ladyship. He liked Eugénie's drawing-room, he thought, as he stood there waiting. It was very untidy. There was a litter of shavings from something that was being unpacked on the floor. A looking-glass stood on the table. They had been to Italy, he remembered. It was probably one of the things she had picked up there: the sort of thing that people did pick up in Italy; an old glass, covered with little spots. He straightened his tie in front of it.

But I prefer a glass in which one can see oneself, he thought, turning away. There was the piano open; and the tea—he smiled—with the cup half full as usual; and branches stuck about the room, branches of withering red and yellow leaves. She liked flowers. He was glad he had remembered to bring her his usual gift. He held the flower wrapped in tissue paper in front of him. But why was the room so full of smoke? A gust blew in. Both the windows in the back room were open, and the smoke was blowing in from the garden. Were they burning weeds, he wondered? He walked to the window and looked out. Yes, there they were—Eugénie and the two little girls. There was a bonfire. As he looked, Magdalena, the little girl who was his favourite, tossed a whole armful of dead leaves. She jerked them as high as she could, and the fire blazed up. A great fan of red flame flung out.

"That's dangerous!" he said aloud.

But Eugénie pulled the children back. They were dancing with excitement. The other little girl, Sara, ducked under her mother's arm, seized another armful of leaves and flung them again. The fire blazed up. Then the Italian servant came out and mentioned his name. He tapped on the window. Eugénie turned and looked up. She held the children back with one hand and raised the other in welcome.

"Stay where you are!" she cried. "We're coming!"

127 A cloud of smoke blew straight at him; it made his eyes water, and he turned and sat down in the chair by the sofa. In another second she came in.

"How very nice of you," she said, hurrying towards him with both her hands stretched out. He rose and took them.

"We're having a bonfire," she said. Her eyes were glowing; her hair was looping down. "That's why I'm all so blown-about," she added, putting her hand to her head. She was untidy, but extremely handsome all the same, Abel thought. A fine large woman, growing ample, he noted as she shook hands; but it suited her. He admired that type more than the pink-and-white pretty Englishwoman. The flesh flowed over her like warm yellow wax; and she had great dark eyes like a foreigner, and a nose with a ripple in it. He held out his camellia; his customary gift. She made a little exclamation as she took the flower from the tissue paper and sat down.

"How very good of you!" she said, and held it for a moment in front of her, and then did what he had often seen her do with a flower—put the stalk between her lips. Her movements always charmed him.

"Having a bonfire for the birthday?" he asked. . . . "No, no, no," he protested, "I don't want tea."

The Years—81

128 She had taken her cup, and sipped the cold tea that was left in it. As he watched her, some memory of the East came back to him; so women would sit in hot countries in their doorways in the sun. But it was very cold at the moment with the window open and the smoke blowing in. He still had his newspaper in his hand; he laid it on the table.

"Seen the news?" he asked.

She put down her cup and slightly opened her large dark eyes. There seemed to be immense reserves of emotion in them. As she waited for him to speak, she raised her hand.

"Parnell," said Abel briefly. "He's dead."

"Dead?" Eugénie echoed him. She let her hand fall dramatically.

"Yes. At Brighton. Yesterday."

"Parnell is dead!" she repeated.

"So they say," said the Colonel. Her emotion always made him feel more matter-of-fact; but he liked it. She took up the paper.

"Poor thing!" she exclaimed, letting it fall.

"Poor thing!" she repeated. Her eyes were full of tears. The Colonel was puzzled. Did she mean Kitty O'Shea? He hadn't thought of her.

"She ruined his career for him," he said with a little snort.

"Ah, but how she must have loved him!" she murmured.

She drew her hand over her eyes. The Colonel was silent for a moment. Her emotion seemed to him out of proportion to its object; but it was genuine, he felt.

"Yes," he said, rather stiffly. "Yes, I suppose so." Eugénie picked up the flower again and held it, twirling it. She was oddly absentminded now and then, but he always felt at his ease with her. He never knew exactly what she wore, but it suited her. It was something purplish today.

"How people suffer! . . ." she murmured, looking at the flower. "How they suffer, Abel!" she said, looking straight at him.

What'd you have said if you'd been through the Mutiny . . . he thought. But he liked her emotion. A great gust of smoke blew in from the other room.

129 "You don't mind the draught?" he asked, looking at the window. She did not answer at once. She was twirling her flower. Then she roused herself and smiled, as if she guessed that he disliked the smoke.

"Yes, yes. Shut it!" she said with a wave of her hand. He went and shut the window. When he turned round, she had got up and was standing at the looking-glass, arranging her hair.

"We've had a bonfire for Maggie's birthday," she murmured, looking at herself in the Venetian glass that was full of spots. "That's why, that's why—" she smoothed her hair and fixed the camellia in her dress. "I'm so very—"

She put her head a little on one side as if to observe the effect of the flower in her dress. The Colonel sat down and waited.

"And was she alone with him?" she asked as she came back. The Colonel glanced at his paper.

"They seem to be hushing things up a bit," he said.

"You don't mean—" Eugénie was beginning; but here the door opened and the children came in. Maggie, the elder, came first; the other little girl, Sara, hung back behind her.

The Years—82

"Hullo!" the Colonel exclaimed. "Here they are!" He turned round. He was very fond of children. "Here's the birthday Queen!" he said, holding out his hand. "Many happy returns of the day to you, Maggie!" He felt in his pocket for the necklace that Crosby had done up in a cardboard box. He held out the parcel. Maggie came up to him to take it. Her hair had been brushed, and she was dressed in a stiff clean frock. She took the parcel and undid it; she held out the blue-and-gold necklace and looked at it. For a moment the Colonel doubted whether she liked it. It looked a little garish as she held it dangling in her hand. And she was silent. Her mother at once supplied the words that she should have spoken.

"How lovely, Maggie! How perfectly lovely!" Maggie held the beads in her hand and said nothing. "Thank Uncle Abel for the lovely necklace," her mother prompted her.

"Thank you for the necklace, Uncle Abel," said Maggie. She spoke directly and accurately, but the Colonel felt another twinge of doubt; she had not liked his present, he felt certain. A pang of disappointment out of all proportion to its object came over him. Her mother, however, fastened it round her neck. Then she turned away to her sister, who was peeping from behind a chair.

"Come, Sara," said her mother. "Come and say how-d'you-do."

She held out her hand partly to coax the little girl, partly, Abel guessed, in order to conceal the very slight deformity that always made him uncomfortable. She had been dropped when she was a baby; one shoulder was slightly higher than the other; it made him feel squeamish; he could not bear the least deformity in a child. It did not affect her spirits, however. She skipped up to him, whirling round on her toe, and kissed him lightly on the cheek. Then she tugged at her sister's frock, and they both rushed away into the back room.

"They are going to admire your lovely present, Abel," said Eugénie. "How you spoil them!—and me too," she added, touching the camellia on her breast.

"I hope she liked it?" he asked. Eugénie did not answer him. She had taken up the cup of cold tea again and was sipping it in her indolent Southern manner.

"And now," she said, leaning back comfortably, "tell me all your news."

The Colonel, too, lay back in his chair. This was the moment he had looked forward to. She gave him a sense of ease and leisure; she made him feel that she knew all about him, as his daughters never did. He would consult her—yes, he would tell her—it would be quite easy to tell her about Mira; he would rather enjoy telling her the whole story. He pondered for a moment. What was his news? Nothing occurred to him on the spur of the moment. With Eugénie, too, he always wanted to make a little splash; she keyed him up somehow; she put a shine on things. While he hesitated, she began:

"We've been having a wonderful time in Venice! I took the children. That's why we're all so brown. We had rooms not on the Grand Canal—I hate the Grand Canal—but just off it. Two weeks of blazing sun; and the colours"—she hesitated—"marvellous!" she exclaimed, "marvellous!" She threw out her hand.

The Colonel had not been to Venice for years.

The Years—83

"Any pleasant people there?" he asked.

"Not a soul," she said. "Not a soul. No one except a dreadful Miss—what was her name? One of those women who make one ashamed of one's country," she said energetically.

"I know 'em," he chuckled.

"But coming back from the Lido in the evening," she resumed, "with the clouds above and the water below—we had a balcony; we used to sit there." She paused.

"Was Digby with you?" the Colonel asked.

"No, poor Digby. He took his holiday earlier, in August. He was up in Scotland with the Lammermuirs shooting. It does him good, you know."

He wondered once more why she had married her husband. But she resumed.

"Now tell me—about you—the family. Martin and Elanor, Hugh and Milly, Morris and . . ." She hesitated; he suspected that she had forgotten the name of Morris' wife.

"Celia," he said. He stopped. They always had a little talk about the family; but he wanted to get on to his own affairs. He gave her a short statement of their doings. He felt a queer wish to bring his own domestic details up to her pitch. Hugh and Milly seemed to be very prosperous—"Milly's expecting another baby at Easter," he threw in; and Morris seemed to be getting his foot on the ladder—"He's a big case on today—Elanor's gone," he interposed; and Edward—"Edward's becoming a regular swell," he said. He paused.

"They seem to think a lot of him at Oxford," he said gruffly. He was very proud of Edward.

"And Delia?" said Eugénie. She looked at the paper. "I'm afraid . . ." she began. The Colonel at once lost his affability. He suddenly looked glum and formidable.

"Perhaps it will bring her to her senses," he said sternly. Eugénie looked at him. They were silent for a moment. Then there were cries from the garden.

"Oh those children!" she exclaimed. She rose and went to the window. The Colonel followed her. The children had stolen back into the garden. The bonfire was burning fiercely. The little girls were springing up and down and shouting as they danced round it. A shabby old man, something like a decayed groom to look at, was standing there with a rake in his hand. Eugénie flung up the window and cried out. But they paid no attention to her. They went on dancing. The Colonel leant out too; they looked like wild creatures with their hair flying. He would have liked to go down and jump over the bonfire, but he was too old.

"Bravo!" he cried, clapping his hands. "Bravo!"

"Little demons!" said Eugénie. But she was as much excited as they were, he observed. She leant out of the window and cried to the old man with the rake:

"Make it blaze! Make it blaze!"

But the old man was raking out the fire. The sticks were scattered. The flames had gone.

"He thinks the garden belongs to him," she said, turning to Abel. In fact the old man was pushing the children away; they stood round watching the flames sink.

"Well, that's over," said Eugénie, heaving a sigh. She turned. Someone had come into the room.

"Oh, Digby, I never heard you!" she exclaimed. Digby stood there with a case in his hands.

The Years—84

"Hullo, Digby," said Abel, shaking hands. His brother looked disapproving; he looked tired.

"What's all this smoke?" he said. He had aged a bit, Abel thought, looking at him. It was partly that he had the air of having come from a formal world, a sedate world, standing there in his frock-coat with the top buttons undone. He was very handsome; beside him the Colonel felt large, weather-beaten and rough. He was a little ashamed of having been caught leaning out of the window clapping his hands.

Digby looks older, he thought as they stood side by side, yet he's five years younger than I am. They stood, feeling a little awkward in each other's presence. They never had a great deal in common. Eugénie was calling out to the children in the garden: then she shut the window and came in. She was not at her ease either, Abel felt; she pushed an armchair behind Digby and, instead of sinking into her corner and sipping her tea, behaved rather as if she were entertaining a man who had come to call—a distinguished man. He was a distinguished man in his way, Abel thought; the top of his tree, a Knight and all the rest of it. But he's not as rich as I am, he thought with satisfaction; because he had always been the failure of the two.

"You look so tired, Digby!" Eugénie exclaimed. "He ought to take a real holiday," she said, turning to Abel. "I wish you'd tell him so." Digby brushed away a white thread that had stuck to his trousers. He coughed slightly. The room was full of smoke.

"What's all this smoke for?" he asked his wife.

"We've been having a bonfire for Maggie's birthday," she said as if excusing herself.

"Oh yes," he said. Abel felt slightly irritated; Maggie was his favourite; her father ought to have remembered her birthday.

"Yes," said Eugénie, turning to Abel again, "he lets everybody else take a holiday, but he never takes one himself. And then, when he's done a full day's work at the office, he comes back with his bag full of papers—" She pointed at the bag.

"You shouldn't work after dinner," said Abel. "That's a bad habit." Digby did look a bit off-colour, he thought. Digby brushed aside this feminine effusiveness.

"Seen the news?" he said to his brother, indicating the paper.

"Yes. By Jove!" said Abel. He always felt that Digby was behind the scenes; he could not help pricking up his ears when they talked politics. And then it's all in the morning paper the day after, he would add, for he slightly resented his brother's official airs, as if he could say more if he would, but must not. Now they talked politics. Eugénie lay back; she seemed to feel that it was not necessary for her to listen. Then she got up and began tidying the litter that had fallen out of the packing-case. Digby stopped what he was saying and watched her. Abel slightly resented this lack of attention. Digby was looking at the glass.

"Like it?" said Eugénie, with her hand on the frame.

"Yes," said Digby; but there was a tone of criticism in his voice. "Quite a pretty one."

"It's only for my bedroom," she said quickly. She began again stuffing the bits of paper into the box. Digby watched her.

"Remember," said Digby, "we're dining with the Mannerings tonight."

The Years—85

135 "Yes; I know," she said. "I shall have to make myself tidy." She touched her hair again. Who were "the Mannerings?" Abel wondered. Bigwigs, mandarins, he supposed half contemptuously. They moved a great deal in that world. He took it as a hint that he should go. Digby generally went off after ten minutes and left them. But now he sat on. And they had come to the end of what they had to say to each other—he and Digby. He still hoped, however, that he might get a little talk with Eugénie alone.

"About this African business—" he began, bethinking him of another question that he could put to Digby—when the children came in; they had come to say good-night. Abel greeted them with pleasure; Maggie was wearing his necklace and it looked very pretty, he thought, or was it she who looked so pretty? But their frocks, their clean blue and pink frocks, were crumpled; they were smudged with the sooty London leaves that they had been holding.

"Grubby little ruffians!" he said, smiling at them. "Why d'you wear your best clothes to play in the garden?" said Sir Digby, as he kissed Maggie. He said it jokingly, but there was a hint of disapproval in his tones. Maggie made no answer. Her eyes seemed riveted by the camellia which her mother was wearing in the front of her dress. She went up and stood looking at her.

"And you—what a little sweep!" said Sir Digby, pointing to Sara.

"It's Maggie's birthday," said Eugénie, holding out her arm again as if to protect the little girl.

"That is a reason, I should have thought," said Sir Digby, surveying his daughters, "to—er—to—er—reform one's habits." He stumbled, trying to make his sentence sound playful; but it turned out as it generally did when he talked to the children, rather lame and pompous.

Sara looked at her father; she seemed to consider him.

126 "To—er—to—er—reform one's habits," she repeated. Emptied of all meaning, she had got the sound and the rhythm of his words exactly. The effect was somehow comic. The Colonel laughed aloud. But he felt that Digby was annoyed. He noticed that he only patted Sara on the head when she came to say good-night; but he kissed Maggie affectionately as she passed him.

"Had a nice birthday?" he said, pulling her to him. Abel made it an excuse to go.

"But there is no need for you to go yet, Abel," Eugénie protested as he held out his hand. He hesitated; he wanted to stay; he wanted to talk to her; and he had scarcely had a chance.

"But you're dining out," he said. He would have liked to stay and tell her about Mira; and then go up and see the children at their supper. She looked at him ambiguously; he did not know what she meant. She did not press him to stay. He turned.

"Oh, I can find my way out alone," he said as he left the room.

He went downstairs rather slowly. He felt depressed and disappointed. He had not seen her alone; he had not told her anything. Perhaps he never would tell anybody. After all, he thought as he went downstairs rather heavily, it was his own affair; it didn't matter much to anybody else. One must burn one's own

The Years—86

smoke, he thought as he took his hat. He glanced round.

137 Yes, he thought. Full of pretty things. He looked vaguely at a great crimson chair with gilt claws that stood in the hall. He envied Digby his house, his children and his wife. He was getting old, he felt. All his children were grown-up; they had left him. He paused on the doorstep and looked out into the street. It was quite dark; lamps were lit; the autumn was drawing in.

And that chap died when he was only forty-six, he thought, and marched up the dark windy street, now spotted with raindrops.

The Years—87

140 "Look!" said Eugénie as the cab trotted over the bridge in the summer twilight. "Isn't that lovely?"

She waved her hand at the water. They were crossing the Serpentine; but her exclamation was only an aside; she was listening to what her husband was saying. Their daughter Magdalena was with them; and she looked out in silence. There was the Serpentine, red in the setting sun; there were the trees grouped together, sculptured, losing their detail; and the ghostly architecture of the little bridge, white at the end, composed the scene. The lights—the sun-light and the artificial light—were strangely mixed.

"... of course it's put the Government in a fix," Sir Digby was saying. "But then that's just what he wants."

"Yes... he'll make a name for himself, that young man," said Lady Pargiter.

The cab passed over the bridge. It entered the shadow of the trees. Now it left the Park and joined the long line of cabs, most of them taking people in evening dress to plays, to dinner-parties, that was streaming towards the Marble Arch. The light grew more and more artificial; yellower and yellower. Eugénie leant across and touched something on her daughter's dress. Maggie looked up. She had thought that they were still talking politics.

"So," said her mother, arranging the flower in front of her dress. She put her head a little on one side and looked at her daughter. She approved of her. Then she gave a sudden laugh and threw her hand out. "D'you know what made me so late?" she said. "That imp, Sally, came in as I was dressing and..."

But her husband interrupted her. He had caught sight of an illuminated clock.

141 "We shall be half an hour behind the time," he said. "But eight-fifteen means eight-thirty," said Eugénie as they turned down a side street.

Sally in her bedroom at the top of the house turned on her side and listened intently. She thought she heard the front door click. Had they come back from their party, she wondered? Was that the sound of somebody dropping a cloak in the hall? A burst of dance music came in through the open window and made it impossible to hear.

She sat up in bed and looked out through the slit of the blind. Through the gap she could see a slice of the sky; then roofs; then the tree in the garden; then the backs of houses opposite standing in a long row. One of the houses was brilliantly lit and from the long open windows came dance music. They were waltzing. She saw shadows twirling across the blind. It was impossible to read; impossible to sleep. First there was the music; then a burst of talk; then people came out into the garden; then the music began again.

142 It was a hot summer's night, and though it was late, the whole world seemed to be alive; the rush of traffic sounded distant but incessant.

There was a faded brown book lying on her bed; as if she had been reading. But it was impossible to read;

impossible to sleep. She lay back on the pillow with her hands behind her head.

"And he says—that man says," she murmured, "the world is nothing but..." She paused. What did he say? Nothing but thought, was it? she asked herself as if she had already forgotten. Well then, since it was impossible to read and impossible to sleep, she would let herself be thought. It was easier to act things than to think them. Legs, body, hands, the whole of her must be laid out passively to take part in this universal process of thinking which the man said was the world living. She stretched herself out. I must lie very still, very straight, she told herself. She waited. Where did thought begin?

In the feet? she asked. There they were, jutting out under the single sheet. They seemed separated, very far away. She closed her eyes. Then against her will something in her hardened. It was impossible to act being thought. She became a root; lying sunk in the earth; veins seemed to thread the cold mass; the tree put forth branches; the branches had leaves; the sun—she wagged a finger.

243 "—the sun shines through the leaves," she said. She opened her eyes in order to verify the sun on the leaves and saw the actual tree standing out there in the garden. It was black. Far from being dappled with sunlight, it had no leaves at all. She felt for a moment as if she had been contradicted. There it was, dead black.

She leant her elbow on the sill and looked out at the tree. A confused clapping sound came from the room where they were having the dance. The music had stopped; people began to come down the iron staircase into the garden which was marked out with blue and yellow lamps dotted along the wall. The voices grew louder. More people came and more people came. The dotted square of green became full of the flowing pale figures of women in evening dress; of upright black-and-white figures of men in evening dress. She watched them moving in and out. They were talking and laughing; but they were too far off for her to hear what they were saying. Sometimes a single word or a laugh rose above the rest, and then there was a confused babble of sound. In their own garden—she looked down—all was empty and silent. A cat slid stealthily along the top of a wall; stopped; and then went on again as if on some secret errand. Another dance struck up.

"Over again, over and over again!" she exclaimed impatiently, for the dance had been going on already for a long time. Then she threw herself back on her pillow. The air, laden with the curious dry smell of London earth, puffed in her face, blowing the blind out. Stretched flat on her bed, she saw the moon; it seemed immensely high above her. Little vapours were moving across the surface. Now they parted and she saw engravings chased over the white disc. What were they, she wondered—mountains? valleys? And if valleys, she said to herself half closing her eyes, then white trees; then icy hollows, and nightingales, two nightingales calling to each other, calling and answering each other across the valleys. The waltz music took the words "calling and answering each other" and flung them out; but then, as it repeated the same rhythm again and again, it rubbed itself into them, coarsened them, destroyed them. The dance music interfered with everything. At first exciting, then it became boring and finally intolerable. Yet it was only twenty minutes to

144 one. She looked at her watch. She might be kept awake by the dance down the street till three or four or five in the morning. Her lip raised itself, like that of a horse that is going to bite. The little brown book was dull. She reached her hand above her head and took down another book from the shelf of battered books without looking at it. Since it was impossible to sleep, impossible to listen and impossible to hear what was being said, she would read—anything. She opened the book at random; but her eye was caught by one of the couples who were still sitting out in the garden though the others had gone in. What were they saying, she wondered? There was something gleaming in the grass, and, as far as she could see, he, the black-and-white figure, stooped and picked it up.

"And as he picks it up," she said to herself, "he says to the lady beside him: Behold, Miss Smith, what I have found on the grass—a fragment of my heart; of my broken heart, he says. I have found it in the grass; and I wear it on my breast"—she hummed the words in time to the melancholy waltz music—"my broken heart, this broken glass, for love—" She paused and glanced at the book. On the fly-leaf was written:

"Sara Pargiter from her Cousin Edward Pargiter."

"... for love," she concluded, "is best."

She turned to the title-page.

"The Antigone of Sophocles, done into English verse by Edward Pargiter," she read.

Once more she looked out of the window. The couple had moved. They were going up the iron staircase. She watched them. They went into the ballroom. "And suppose in the middle of the dance," she murmured, "she takes it out; and suppose she looks at it and says, 'What is this?' and it's only a piece of broken glass—of broken glass..." She looked down at the book again.

145 "The Antigone of Sophocles," she read. The book was brand-new; it cracked as she opened it; this was the first time she had opened it.

"The Antigone of Sophocles, done into English verse by Edward Pargiter," she read again. He had given it her in Oxford one hot summer's day, she remembered; one hot afternoon when they had been trailing through chapels and libraries. "Trailing and wailing," she hummed, turning over the pages, "and he said to me, getting up from the low armchair, and brushing his hand through his hair"—she glanced over the book out of the window—"my wasted youth, my wasted youth." The waltz was now at its most intense, its most melancholy. "Taking in his hand," she hummed in time to it, "this broken glass, this faded heart, he said to me..." Here the music stopped; there was a sound of clapping; the dancers once more came out into the garden.

She began skipping through the pages. At first she read a line or two at random; then, from the litter of broken words, scenes rose, quickly, inaccurately, as she skipped. (The voices were babbling in the garden.) The unburied body of a murdered man lay like a fallen tree-trunk, like a statue, with one foot stark in the air. Vultures gathered. Down they flopped on the silver sand. With a lurch, with a reel, the top-heavy birds came waddling; with a flap of the grey throat swinging, they hopped—she beat her hand on the counterpane as she read—to that lump there. Quick, quick, quick with repeated jerks they struck the mouldy flesh. Yes. She

The Years—91

glanced at the tree outside in the garden. The unburied body of the murdered man lay on the sand. Then in a yellow cloud came whirling—who? She turned the page quickly. Antigone? Yes. She came whirling out of the dust-cloud to where the vultures were reeling and flung white sand over the blackened foot. She stood there letting fall white dust over the blackened foot. (People were talking in the garden.) Then behold! there were more clouds; dark clouds; the horsemen leapt down; she was seized; her wrists were bound with withies; and they bore her, thus bound—where?

There was a roar of laughter from the garden. She looked up. Where did they take her to? she asked. The garden was full of people. She could not hear a word that they were saying. The figures were moving in and out.

"To the estimable court of the respected ruler?" she murmured, picking up a word or two at random, for she was still looking out into the garden. The man's name was Creon. And what did he do? He buried her. She looked down again. It was a moonlight night. The blades of the cactuses were sharp silver. The man in the loincloth gave three sharp taps with his mallet on the brick. She was buried alive. The tomb was a brick mound. There was just room for her to lie straight out, straight out in a brick tomb, she said. And that's the end, she yawned, shutting the book.

She laid herself out straight, under the cold smooth sheets, and pulled the pillow over her ears. She was very sleepy. The one sheet and the one blanket fitted softly round her. At the bottom of the bed was a long stretch of cool fresh mattress. The sound of the dance music became dulled. Her body seemed to drop suddenly; then it reached ground. A dark wing brushed her mind, leaving a pause; a blank space. Everything—the music, the voices—became stretched out and generalised. The book fell on the floor. She was asleep.

There was a sound in the room. Somebody had come in. She turned over.

"Who's that?" she murmured. She sat up and rubbed her eyes.

"Oh, it's you," she said. "I never heard you come in."

It was her sister. She stood at the door, hesitating. "Asleep?" she said in a low voice.

"No. Awake," said Sara. She rubbed her eyes.

Maggie came across the room and sat down on the edge of the bed. The blind was blowing out; the sheets were slipping off the bed. Sally was sitting up with her nightgown open and her hair falling across her shoulders, blinking her eyes. She felt a little dazed for a moment. It looked so untidy, so higgledy-piggledy after the ballroom. There was a tumbler with a toothbrush in it on the wash-stand; the towel was crumpled on the towel-horse; and a book had fallen on the floor. She stooped and picked up the book. As she did so, the music burst out down the street. She held back the blind. The women in pale dresses, the men in black and white, were crowding up the stairs into the ballroom. Snatches of talk and laughter were blown across the garden.

"Is there a dance?" she asked.

"Yes. Down the street," said Sara.

Maggie looked out. At this distance it was faint, mysterious, lovely. . . .

The Years—92

"What's been happening?" Sara asked.

"Oh," said Maggie, looking at the bed again, "lots of things."

She stretched herself and unpinned the flower that she was wearing. It was drooping; the white petals were stained with black marks. All sorts of little sentences, and people coming up to her and talking, and lights and sounds, were still passing through her mind. And they still seemed to be going on down the street. She looked out of the window again. The mixture of lights was very odd; one leaf was a lurid green; another was a bright white. The branches crossed each other at different levels. Sally suddenly laughed. Maggie looked round. When she laughed she was crooked, like something blown on one side.

"Did anybody give you a piece of glass," she waved her hand out, "saying to you, Miss Pargiter . . . my broken heart?"

"No," said Maggie, ". . . a broken heart . . . a broken glass . . . why should they?" The flower fell off her lap onto the floor.

"I was thinking," said Sara. "The people in the garden . . ." She waved her hand at the window. She's still asleep, Maggie thought. She moved, and to go.

"Who did you sit next?" Sara asked, as if to stop her.

"A Sir Somebody Something—a man in gold lace," said Maggie. She sat down again.

"Why gold lace?" said Sara.

"I don't know," said Maggie.

"Was it very exciting?" Sara asked.

"Yes—no," said Maggie. She was getting used to the room; the discrepancy between this litter and the ballroom with its shiny floor and its well-dressed people was leaving her. She began to pull off her gloves. She envied her sister lying in bed in her loose nightgown with the window open and the breeze blowing in.

"It's all great nonsense," she said.

"Why?" Sara asked. "What do they say?" She rubbed her eyes again. She was waking up.

Maggie stretched herself and looked out of the window over her shoulder.

"Have you read a book—have you been to a play—that sort of thing, they say," she said.

"But the man in gold lace?" Sara persisted.

She was now wide-awake. She was sitting bolt upright. She had her hand on her sister's dress, as if to prevent her from going.

"He was going to a party," said Maggie. She paused. Something had caught her eye. A branch swayed up and down in the little breeze. The blind blew out between them, and Maggie held it so that the window was uncurtained. Now she could see the whole sky.

"It's the moon," she said. It was the moon that was making the leaves white.

"The moon . . ." Sara murmured, looking at it.

"When the nightingales . . . in the frozen pools . . ." She yawned.

"You're asleep," said Maggie, trying to get up. But her dress was held by her sister.

"Tell me," she said, "if they don't say O my broken heart, what do they say?—at parties." Maggie flicked off some flecks of white that had stuck to her arm from her gloves.

The Years—93

"It was very hot, he said," she said. "It's very late," she added. "I must go."

She picked up the little brown book which lay on the counterpane and smoothed out the bedclothes. Sara took the book out of her hand.

"This man," she said, tapping the ugly little brown volume, "says the world's nothing but thought, Maggie."

"Does he?" said Maggie, putting the book on the washstand. It was a device, she knew, to keep her standing there talking. But she wanted to go to bed.

"D'you think it's true?" Sara asked.

"Possibly," said Maggie, without thinking what she was saying. She put out her hand to draw the curtain.

"The world's nothing but thought, does he say?" she repeated. It hitched onto something she had been thinking. As the cab crossed the Serpentine it had suddenly struck her that the trees, the bridge, that little picture, was detached from what she was doing. She had wanted to stay there looking at them.

"Then what about trees and colours?" she said, turning round.

"Trees and colours?" Sara repeated.

"Would there be trees if we didn't see them?" said Maggie.

"What's 'I'?" . . . 'I' . . . She stopped. She did not know what she meant. She was talking nonsense.

"Yes," said Sara, holding her dress tight to prevent her from going. "Would there be trees . . .?"

But as she spoke there was a rustle outside; the door opened and Lady Pargiter swept in with a sound of something jingling.

"Oh my dear children!" she exclaimed, "why are you still out of bed? Still talking?"

She came across the room, looking very animated, as if she were still under the influence of the party. Jewels flashed on her neck and her arms. She was extraordinarily handsome. She glanced round her.

"And the flower's on the floor, and everything's so untidy," she said. She picked up the flower that Maggie had dropped and put it to her lips.

"Because I was reading, Mamma, because I was waiting." She took her mother's hand and stroked the bare arm. She imitated her mother's manner so exactly that Maggie smiled. For they were the very opposite of each other—Lady Pargiter was so sumptuous; Sally so angular. But it's worked, she thought to herself. Lady Pargiter allowed herself to be pulled down onto the bed.

"But you must go to sleep, Sal," she protested. "What did the doctor say about your back? Lie straight, lie still, he said." She pushed her back onto the pillows.

"I am lying straight and still," said Sara. "Now"—she looked up at her—"tell me about the party."

Maggie stood upright in the window. She watched the couples coming down the iron staircase. Soon the garden was full of pale whites and pinks, moving in and out. She half heard them talking about the party.

"It was a very nice party," her mother was saying. "How I wish you'd been with us—but never mind. First of all there was the dinner; I took down a most charming man—"

Maggie watched the dresses moving about on the square of green. They changed colour as they came under the differently coloured fairy lamps on the wall.

"No fish-knives?" she heard Sara saying.

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After a time her mother repeated, "... and he was a most charming man." She turned round.

"Who was the man I sat next?" she asked.

"Sir Matthew Mayhew," said Lady Pargiter.

"Who is Sir Matthew Mayhew?" said Maggie.

Her mother flung her hand out.

"A most distinguished man, Maggie! It was a great honour to sit next him." There was a note of reproach in her voice.

"It was a great honour, Maggie, to sit next to him," Sara repeated, laughing. But Lady Pargiter continued:

"It was, Sara. A great honour. And when Mary Palmer," she went on, taking Sally's hand in hers, "who was an old friend of Grandmamma's, said to me, 'Which is your daughter?' I see Maggie, miles away at the other end of the room, talking to somebody whom she might have met every day of her life in an omnibus!"

Her words were stressed so that they seemed to rise and fall. She emphasised the rhythm still further by tapping her fingers on Sally's bare arm.

"But I don't see Martin every day," Maggie protested.

"I haven't seen him since he came back from Africa."

"But you don't go to parties, my dear Maggie, to talk to your own cousins. You go to parties to—"

Here the dance music crashed out. The first chords seemed possessed of frantic energy, as if they were summoning the dancers imperiously to return. Lady Pargiter stopped in the middle of her sentence. She sighed; her body seemed to become indolent and suave. The heavy lids lowered themselves slightly over her large dark eyes. She swayed her head slowly in time to the music.

"What's that they're playing?" she murmured. She hummed the tune, beating time with her hand. "Something I used to dance to."

"Dance it now, Mamma," said Sara.

"Yes, Mamma. Show us how you used to dance," Maggie urged her.

"But without a partner—?" Lady Pargiter protested.

Maggie pushed a chair away.

"Imagine a partner," Sara urged her.

"Well," said Lady Pargiter. She rose. "It was something like this," she said. She paused; she held her skirt out with one hand; she slightly crooked the other in which she held the flower; she twirled round and round in the space which Maggie had cleared. She moved with extraordinary stateliness. All her limbs seemed to bend and flow in the lilt and the curve of the music; which became louder and clearer as she danced to it. She circled in and out among the chairs and tables and then, as the music stopped, "There!" she exclaimed. Her body seemed to fold and close itself together as she sighed "There!" and sank all in one movement on the edge of the bed.

"How wonderful!" Maggie exclaimed. Her eyes rested on her mother with pure admiration.

"Nonsense," Lady Pargiter laughed, panting slightly. "I'm much too old to dance now; but when I was young; when I was your age—" She sat there panting.

"You danced out of the house onto the terrace and found a little note folded in your bouquet—" said

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Sara, stroking her mother's arm. "Tell us that story, Mamma."

"Not tonight," said Lady Pargiter. "Listen—there's the clock striking!"

The clock struck twice. She got up to go.

"I'll tell you the true story one of these days," she said as she bent to kiss her daughter good-night.

But Sara held her fast.

"Tell it now," she said.

"Papa's waiting for me," Lady Pargiter protested.

"You came out onto a balcony in Venice," Maggie began.

"No. That's Grandmamma's story," Lady Pargiter protested. "You've got them mixed. It was Grandmamma who went out onto the balcony at Venice."

"And somebody threw a rose," Sara prompted her.

"Yes," Eugénie smiled. "He was sitting in a gondola below. And he saw a girl all in white standing on a balcony. 'That is the only girl I shall ever marry!' he said." She spoke very dramatically.

"And then?" Maggie asked.

"She wore the rose at dinner that night," said Lady Pargiter, picking the towel up and smoothing it out on the towel-horse.

"And they lived in a ruined castle," said Sara, catching hold of her mother's skirt. "In a ruined castle in the wilds of Ireland; and when the wind blew, 'That's the chimbley,' the old man in gaiters would say, 'blowing into the Irish sea,' and Grandmamma put her hand under the table, and there were twenty-five little black pigs just brought to birth by the old sow!"

"You're thinking of the turkey in Aunt Jinny's bed," Lady Pargiter laughed. "And it's high time we were all in bed too," she added, snatching away her hand. "There's Papa calling me."

They heard footsteps in the passage outside, and then Sir Digby's voice at the door.

"Eugénie! It's very late, Eugénie!" they heard him say.

"Coming!" she cried. "Coming!"

Sara caught her by the train of her dress. "You haven't told us the story of the bouquet, Mamma!" she cried. "The heart-shaped note in the bouquet. . . ."

"Eugénie!" Sir Digby repeated. His voice sounded peremptory. "Have you locked—"

"Yes, yes, yes," said Eugénie. "I will tell you the true story another time," she said, freeing herself from her daughter's grasp. She kissed them both quickly and went out of the room.

"She won't tell us," said Maggie, picking up her gloves. She spoke bitterly. She shut the window. They could hear their father and mother talking along the passage.

"It's the kitchen door," said Maggie. "She's forgotten to have it mended."

They could hear their father's voice expostulating.

"Pirouetting up and down with his sword between his legs; with his opera hat under his arm and his sword between his legs," said Sara, pummelling her pillows viciously.

The voices went further away, downstairs.

"Who was the note from, d'you think?" said Maggie. She paused, looking at her sister burrowing into her pillows.

"The note? What note?" said Sara. "Oh, the note in the bouquet. I don't remember," she said. She yawned.

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Maggie pulled the curtain but she left a chink of light.

"Pull it tight, Maggie," said Sara irritably. "Shut out that din."

She curled herself up with her back to the window. She had raised a hump of pillow against her head as if to shut out the dance music that was still going on. She pressed her face into a cleft of the pillows. She looked like a chrysalis wrapped round in the sharp white folds of the sheet. Only the tip of her nose was visible. One could see the slope of her hip, and her feet jutting out at the end of the bed covered by a single sheet. She gave a profound sigh that was half a snore; she was asleep already.

Maggie turned out the light and went along the passage. Then she saw that there were lights in the hall beneath. She stopped and looked down over the banister. The hall was lit up. She could see the great Italian chair with the gilt claws that stood in the hall. Her mother had thrown her evening cloak over it, so that it fell in soft golden folds over the crimson cover. She could see a tray with whisky and a soda-water syphon on the hall table. Then she heard the voices of her father and mother as they came up the kitchen stairs. They had been down in the basement seeing to the doors, for there had been a burglary up the street; and her mother had promised to have a new lock put on the kitchen door. She could hear her father say:

"... they'd melt it down; we should never get it back again."

Maggie went on a few steps upstairs.

"I'm so sorry, Digby," Eugénie said as they came into the hall. "I will tie a knot in my handkerchief; I will go directly after breakfast tomorrow morning. . . . Yes," she said, gathering her cloak in her arms, "I will go myself, and I will say 'I've had enough of your excuses, Mr Toye. No, Mr Toye, you have deceived me too often. And after all these years!'"

Then there was a pause. Maggie could hear soda-water squirted into a tumbler; the chink of a glass; and then the lights went out.

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"SOLD" was written on a strip of bright red paper pasted across the house-agent's board.

"Already!" said Martin as he paused. He had made a little circle to look at his uncle's house in Browne Street. And it was already sold. The red strip gave him an unpleasant shock. It was sold already, and Digby had only been dead three months—Eugénie not much more than a year. He stood for a moment gazing at the black windows now grimed with dust. It was a house of character and dignity; built some time in the eighteenth century. I used to like going there, he thought. But now an old newspaper was on the doorstep; wisps of straw had caught in the railings; and he could see, for there were no blinds, into an empty room. A woman was peering up at him from behind the bars of a parrot's cage in the basement. She looked at him with unfriendly suspicious eyes; as if she suspected him of loitering for no good reason. He turned away. A feeling of something extinguished came over him as he went down the street.

It's a grimy, it's a sordid end, he thought; I used to enjoy going there. But he disliked brooding over unpleasant thoughts. What's the good of it? he asked himself.

"The King of Spain's daughter," he hummed as he turned the corner, "came to visit me . . ."

"And how much longer," he asked himself, pressing the bell again, as he stood, twenty minutes later on the doorstep of the house in Abercorn Terrace, "is old Crosby going to keep me waiting?"

He stood there, looking at the buff-coloured front of the large, architecturally insignificant, but no doubt convenient family mansion in which his father and sister still lived. "She takes her time nowadays," he thought. But here the door opened, and Crosby appeared.

"Hullo, Crosby!" he said.

She beamed on him so that her gold tooth showed. He was always her favourite, they said, and the thought pleased him.

"How's the world treating you?" he asked, as he gave her his hat.

She was just the same—more shrivelled, more gnat-like, and her blue eyes were more prominent perhaps.

"Rheumatics all right?" he asked, as she helped him off with his coat. She grinned, silently. He felt friendly, but to shake hands with her would only make her shy, he supposed. "And Miss Eleanor?" he asked, as he opened the drawing-room door. The room was empty. She was not there. But she had been there, for there was a book open on the table. Nothing had been changed. He stood in front of the fire and looked at his mother's picture. In the course of the past few years it had ceased to be his mother; it had become a work of art. But it was dirty.

There used to be a flower in the grass, he thought, peering into a dark corner: but now there was nothing but dirty brown paint. And what's she been reading? he wondered. There was a book on the table by the

chair. "Renan," he read. "Why Renan?" he asked himself. He took the book up and began to read it as he waited.

"Mr Martin, Miss," said Crosby, opening the study door. Eleanor looked round. She was standing by her father's chair with her hands full of long strips of newspaper cuttings, as if she had been reading them to her father. There was a chess-board in front of him; the chess-men were set out for a game; but he was lying back in his chair. He looked lethargic, and rather gloomy.

"Put 'em away. . . . Keep 'em safe somewhere," he said, jerking his thumb at the cuttings. That was a sign that he had grown very old, Eleanor thought; wanting newspaper cuttings kept. He had grown inert and ponderous after his stroke; there were red veins in his nose and in his cheeks.

"Mr Martin's called," Crosby repeated.

"Martin's come," Eleanor said. Her father seemed not to hear. He sat still with his head sunk on his breast. "Martin," Eleanor repeated. "Martin . . ."

Did he want to see him or did he not want to see him? She waited as if for some sluggish thought to rise. At last he gave a little grunt; but what it meant she was not certain.

"I'll send him in after tea," she said. She paused for a moment. He roused himself and began fumbling with his chess-men. The sight stirred her. He still insisted upon doing things for himself.

She went into the drawing-room and found Martin standing in front of the placid, smiling picture of their mother reading a book.

"Why Renan?" he said as she came in. He shut the book and kissed her. "Why Renan?" he repeated. She flushed slightly. It made her shy, for some reason, that he had found the book there, open. She sat down and laid the press cuttings on the tea-table.

"How's Papa?" he asked. She had lost something of her bright colour, he thought, glancing at her, and her hair had a tuft of grey in it.

"Not very bright," she said. "Rather gloomy," she added, glancing at the press cuttings.

"I wonder," she added, "who writes that sort of thing?"

"What sort of thing?" said Martin. He picked up one of the crinkled strips and began reading it: "... an exceptionally able public servant . . . a man of wide interests. . . . Oh, Digby," he said. "Obituaries. I passed the house this afternoon," he added. "It's sold."

"Already?" said Eleanor.

"It looked very shut-up and desolate," he added. "There was a dirty old woman in the basement."

Eleanor took out a hair-pin and began fraying the wick of the kettle.

"D'you remember the Italian manservant?" she said, "who always seemed to be finishing his dinner?"

"I liked going there," said Martin, watching her. "I liked Eugénie," he added.

Eleanor paused.

"Yes . . ." she said doubtfully. She had never felt at her ease with her. "She exaggerated," she added.

"Well of course," Martin laughed. He smiled at

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some memory of her. "She had less sense of truth than . . . that's no sort of use, Nell," he broke off, irritated by her fumbling with the wick.

"Yes, yes," she protested. "It boils in time."

"I never felt altogether at my ease," she began again. "She . . . she . . ."

She paused, stretching out towards the tea caddy: she measured the tea. "One, two, three, four," she counted.

She still used the nice old silver tea-caddy, he noticed, with the sliding lid. He watched her measuring the tea methodically—one, two, three, four. He was silent.

"We can't tell a lie to save our souls," he said abruptly.

What makes him say that? Eleanor wondered.

"I don't mean that she told lies exactly," she said aloud. But here the door opened and Crosby came in carrying some sort of dish. She left the door ajar and a dog pushed in after her.

"I only meant—" Eleanor added; but she could not say what she meant with Crosby in the room fidgeting about.

"It's time Miss Eleanor got a new kettle," said Martin. He pointed to the old brass kettle, faintly engraved with a design of roses, which he had always hated.

"Crosby," said Eleanor, still poking with her pin, "doesn't hold with new inventions. Crosby won't trust herself in the Tube, will you, Crosby?"

Crosby grinned. They always spoke to her in the third person, because she never answered but only grinned. The dog snuffed at the dish she had just put down. "Crosby's letting that beast get much too fat," said Martin.

"That's what I'm always telling her," said Eleanor.

"If I were you, Crosby," said Martin, "I'd cut down his meals and take him for a brisk run round the park every morning."

"Oh, Mr Martin!" Crosby protested, shocked by his brutality into speech.

The dog followed her out of the room.

"Crosby's the same as ever," said Martin.

Eleanor had lifted the lid of the kettle and was looking in. "Oh, this kettle!" she exclaimed. There were no bubbles on the water yet.

"Damn that kettle," said Martin. He took up one of the newspaper cuttings and began to make it into a spill.

"No, no, Papa wants them kept," said Eleanor. "But he wasn't like that in the least," she said, laying her hand on the newspaper cuttings.

"What was he like?" Martin asked.

Eleanor paused. She could see her uncle clearly in her mind's eye; he held his top-hat in his hand; he laid his hand on her shoulder as they stopped in front of a picture.

"He used to take me to the National Gallery," she said.

"Oh yes—" said Martin. "But he was such a damned snob."

"Only on the surface," said Eleanor.

"And always finding fault with Eugénie about little things," Martin added.

"But think of living with her," said Eleanor.

"That manner—" She threw her hand out, but not as Eugénie threw her hand out, Martin thought.

"She ought to have been an actress," she added.

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"I liked her," said Martin. "I liked going there." He saw the untidy room; the piano open; the window open; a wind blowing the curtains. "And what are they going to do?" he said, "Maggie and Sara?"

"Live together, I suppose," she said. "They won't have much to live on," she added. "They're abroad."

Martin paused. He looked at Eleanor. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask her to tell him the story about Eugénie's past.

"Wasn't there some story," he began, "about Digby's finding a letter?" He wanted to say, Didn't she have an affair with somebody? But it was more difficult to be open with his sister than with other women, because she always treated him as if he were a small boy.

"Yes," she said. "There was a story—"

But here the electric bell rang sharply. She stopped.

"Papa," she said. She rose.

"No," said Martin. "I'll go." He got up.

"But you've had no tea?" she said.

"Don't want any," he said. "And I promised him a game of chess."

"Thanks, Martin. He'll enjoy that," said Eleanor with relief. How terrible old age was, she thought, as he shut the door; shearing off all one's faculties, one by one, but leaving something alive in the centre: leaving—she swept up the press cuttings—a game of chess, a drive in the park, and a visit from old General Arbuthot in the evening. But he wasn't like that, she said, glancing at the obituary notices of the late Sir Digby Pargiter: "... a man of singularly handsome presence . . . shot, fished and played golf. . . ." No, I was very fond of Uncle Digby, she thought. A distinct feeling of his presence came back to her. But Martin said he was a snob; Martin liked Eugénie; she never had. The same person's different to two different people, she thought, turning her watch on her wrist. She glanced at it; half an hour? Three-quarters with any luck, she thought, timing the game of chess; and took up Renan and laid him on the table in front of her.

She had always wanted to know how Christianity hitched on to the other religions. There was India, Egypt, Greece, Rome. And how do they hitch on to England? she thought, England—she touched a tea-cup. England she did know something about; but England, after all, was not the whole universe. How did Christianity hitch on?

She found her place and began to read. She read a page or two. Then the spout of the kettle puffed steam at her. How odd it is, she thought, as she made the tea, that I'm here, in this drawing-room, in Abercorn Terrace, in front of the Dutch cabinet; getting a little spark from what a man said—when was it? about the year thirty-four. Here it comes skipping across all those centuries. Over those seas; over those mountains.

She poured out her tea. What a man said, then, there. A man under a fig tree. . . . She helped herself to the hot cake.

What a man said under a fig tree; on a hill, she continued, eating her cake and glancing at the page. And another man writes it down; but suppose what that man says is just as false as what that man said in the newspaper? The man dies; somebody writes it down; and it's passed on and on—she looked up at the reflection of the evening sun that was making the blue plates now blue, now livid, in the cabinet—over all

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those hills, over all those years, she thought; and at last a church rises, a church with a filigree spire in the Bayswater Road, she added. Not that she ever went there. She went on reading as she ate.

"The actual words are very beautiful," she said aloud. She paused. She heard movements in the next room. Since at any moment she might be interrupted, it was impossible to give her mind to the French. She liked reading this man's French. French of course I know, she thought, leaning back and sipping her tea. French, Italian and a little German. But what horrid gaps, what blank white spaces, there are in my knowledge of the world, she thought, looking at the tea-table. Take this cup, for instance, she added; she held it out in front of her. What's it made of? Atoms? Why do they stick together? The smooth hard surface of the china with its red flower on it seemed to her for a second a marvellous mystery. She held the cup in her hand, looking at it. Then there was a sound in the hall. The game's over already, she sighed. She listened. Somebody had come in. But whoever it was did not come into the drawing-room. Perhaps Martin had left his pipe in his pocket and gone to fetch it.

Why did he say: We can't tell a lie to save our souls? she asked, pouring herself out another cup of tea. He was thinking of himself; one always knew by the tone of voice when someone was thinking of himself. Probably he was justifying his own action in leaving the Army. It might be that. He had been right in her opinion; courageous; she admired him for it. But isn't it odd, she thought, that he should be such a dandy too, with little white stripes on his suit, considering he tells the truth? He ought never to have been a soldier, she thought; he's much too pugnacious. He ought to have been—he had taken to shaving off his moustache; she was glad; for his mouth was his good point—an architect? she asked herself. Something of the sort; he was very fond of buildings. But she knew so little now about him. He has his love affairs, I suppose, she thought. Only he doesn't tell me.

A door shut; she heard Martin's voice in the hall. He was talking to somebody. Of course he has his love affairs, she thought, hearing his voice through the door. It became perfectly obvious to her, from some sound in his voice, that he had a great many love affairs. But who with? she asked as the door opened.

"Hullo, Rose!" she exclaimed, surprised to see her sister come in too. "I thought you were in Northumberland!"

"You thought I was in Northumberland!" Rose laughed, kissing her. "But why? I said the eighteenth."

"But isn't today the eleventh?" said Eleanor.

"You're only a week behind the times, Nell," said Martin.

"Then I must have dated all my letters wrong!" Eleanor exclaimed. She glanced apprehensively at her writing-table. The walrus, with a worn patch in his back, still stood there.

"Tea, Rose?" she asked.

"No. It's a bath I want," said Rose. She threw off her hat and ran her fingers through her hair.

"You're looking very well," said Eleanor, thinking how handsome she looked. But she had a scratch on her chin.

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"A positive beauty, isn't she?" Martin laughed at her.

Rose threw up her head rather like a horse. They always bickered, Eleanor thought. Rose was handsome, but she wished she dressed better. She was dressed in a green hairy coat and skirt with leather buttons, and she carried a shiny bag. She had been holding meetings in the North.

"I want a bath," Rose repeated. "I'm dirty. And what's all this?" she said, pointing to the press cuttings on the table. "Oh, Uncle Digby," she added casually, pushing them away. He had been dead some months now; they were already yellowish and curled.

"Martin says the house has been sold," said Eleanor.

"Has it?" she said indifferently. She broke off a piece of cake and began munching it. "Spoiling my dinner," she said. "But I had no time for lunch."

"What a woman of action she is!" Martin chaffed her.

"How did the meetings go?" Eleanor asked.

"Yes. What about the North?" said Martin.

They began to discuss politics. She had been speaking at a bye-election. A stone had been thrown at her; she put her hand to her chin. But she had enjoyed it.

"I think we gave 'em something to think about," she said, breaking off another piece of cake.

She ought to have been the soldier, Eleanor thought. She was exactly like the picture of old Uncle Pargiter of Pargiter's Horse. Martin, now that he had shaved his moustache off and showed his lips, ought to have been—what? Something that kept him occupied, yet gave him time to do whatever it was that interested him. The trees in the back garden caught her eyes; the sun was on them. They moved up and down, up and down; she watched them; it was an afternoon in early spring. The bushes had green tips on them. There was a network of shade and sun on the wall.

"Eleanor——" said Rose.

Eleanor started.

"Eleanor's broody," said Martin.

"No, not at all—not at all," she protested. "What are you talking about?"

"I was asking you," said Rose, "if you remember that row when the microscope was broken? Well, I met that boy—that horrid, ferret-faced boy—Erridge—up in the North."

"He wasn't horrid," said Martin.

"He was," Rose persisted. "He was a horrid little sneak. He pretended that it was I who broke the microscope and it was he who broke it. . . . D'you remember that row?" She turned to them.

"I don't remember that row," said Eleanor. "There were so many," she added.

"That was one of the worst," said Martin.

"It was," said Rose. She pursed her lips together. Some memory seemed to have come back to her. "And after it was over," she said, turning to Martin, "you came up into the nursery and asked me to go beetling with you in the Round Pond. D'you remember?"

She paused. There was something queer about the memory, Eleanor could see. She spoke with curious intensity.

"And you said, 'I'll ask you three times; and if you don't answer the third time, I'll go alone.' And I swore, 'I'll let him go alone.'" Her blue eyes blazed.

"I can see you," said Martin. "Wearing a pink frock,

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with a knife in your hand."

"And you went," Rose said; she spoke with suppressed vehemence. "And I dashed into the bathroom and cut this gash"—she held out her wrist. Eleanor looked at it. There was a thin white scar just above the joint—"on my hand."

When did she do that? Eleanor thought. She could not remember. She had locked herself into the bathroom with a knife and cut her wrist. She had known nothing about it. It must have bled.

"Oh, Rose always was a firebrand!" said Martin. He got up. "She always had the devil's own temper," he added. He stood for a moment looking round the drawing-room, cluttered up with several hideous pieces of furniture that he would have got rid of had he been Eleanor, he thought, and forced to live there. But perhaps she did not mind things like that.

"Dining out?" she said. He dined out every night. She would like to have asked him where he was dining.

He nodded without saying anything. He met all sorts of people she did not know, she reflected; and he did not want to talk about them. He had turned to the fireplace.

"That picture wants cleaning," he said, pointing to the picture of their mother.

"It's a nice picture," he added, looking at it critically. "But usen't there to be a flower in the grass?"

Eleanor looked at it. She had not looked at it, so as to see it, for many years.

"Was there?" she said.

"Yes. A little blue flower," said Martin. "I can remember it when I was a child. . . ."

He crossed the room. "What awful lives children live!" he said, waving his hand at Rose as he crossed the room. "Don't they, Rose?"

"Yes," said Rose. "And they can't tell anybody," she added.

"Well, so long, Nell," he said, and shut the door.

"The King of Spain's daughter," he hummed as he went down the steps and walked along the street, "came to visit me. All for the sake of. . ." He stopped. How does it go on? he asked himself. "A silver nutmeg tree?" he added. But what was a silver nutmeg tree? He looked down the long avenue. The pavement was spattered with the shadows of branches. It was the queer evening hour between the lights. The white houses looked spectral, as if robbed of their substance. The people, even the vans and cabs, seemed to have something stealthy and evanescent about them so that they were on you and past you before you had realised them. All was gay and random. An organ was fluting out its merry little jog further down the road. "The King of Spain's daughter," he hummed in time to the tune as he drew near. The organ moved round and round, shifted this way and that on its stick, as if the old man who played it were half dancing to the tune. A pretty servant-girl ran up the area steps and gave him a penny. His supple Italian face wrinkled all over as he whipped off his cap and bowed to her. The girl smiled and slipped back into the kitchen.

"All for the sake of my little nutmeg tree," Martin hummed, peering down into the kitchen through the area railings. There they were sitting at a kitchen table, with pots of jam and loaves of bread, lit up in the light

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of the fire. They look very snug, he thought, sitting by the fire with a penny for the paper, a penny for the organ-grinder and the King of Spain's daughter. . . .

He crossed the road. He had come out into one of the busy shopping streets. The great windows were lit up. Everybody seemed light-hearted, irresponsible, sallying out of their houses, flaunting along the street, with the light in their faces. . . . with pennies for the organ-grinders, pennies for the newspapers, he hummed. The fruit-shop at the corner was banked up with fruit: pine-apples, melons and tangerine oranges. With pennies for the oranges, pennies for the newspapers, he repeated as he peered into the shop. A placard met his eye. "The King" was written on it in large red letters. . . . The King, he said to himself, now it's the King. He was pleased that it was the King, glad that a new reign had begun. He looked down the long street, with its dipping line of lights, as if they were strung on a rope which dipped in the middle. Now that the old Queen's safely tombed, he thought; now that the crape's taken off the chandelier in the middle of the drawing-room, there's a feeling, he thought, walking on through the press of people coming down Oxford Street, of opulence, of extravagance. . . . He stopped and looked at the model of a toy boat in the window; he looked at some dressing-cases shining yellow, made of brand-new hide. He considered the row of silver bottles for a moment. But who wrote that song, he wondered as he sauntered on, about the King of Spain's daughter, that Pippy used to sing to me?

He turned out of Oxford Street and went down one of the dark little streets that lead from it. She used to sing it as she wiped his ears with a bit of slimy flannel, he remembered. He liked the purlieus of London—these long back streets, where in the fading light, with a sense of the day's work done, women chattered for bits of meat: flares burnt—he was pushing his way through a street market—and men slowly perambulated the street, pushing barrows and crying hoarsely, "Any old iron to sell? Any old iron?"

And then the old lady in the armchair, he thought, used to take him on her knee and croak out in her wheezy rattle of a voice, "Sur le pont d'Avignon, ron ron ron et plon plon plon. . ." The bristles on her chin tickled his face, he remembered, as she croaked, "Sur le pont d'Avignon. . ." How did it go? Tout le monde dansait. . . . She jiggled him up and down on her knees, singing "Ron ron ron et plon plon plon," and then suddenly her knee gave, and down he was tumbled onto the floor.

V

THE shabby street on the south side of the river was very noisy. It was a fine spring morning, and the different sounds in the street below seemed to merge into each other like the hum of bees in a swarm. Now and again a voice detached itself from the general clamour. A woman shouted to her neighbour; a child cried. A man trundling a barrow opened his mouth and bawled up at the windows as he passed. There were bedsteads, grates, pokers and odd pieces of twisted iron on his barrow. But whether he was selling old iron or buying old iron it was impossible to say; the rhythm persisted; but the words were almost rubbed out.

The swarm of sound, the rush of the traffic, the shouts of the hawkers, the single cries and the general cries, came into the upper room of one of the houses in Hyams Place where Sara Pargiter sat at the piano. She was playing. Then she stopped.

"D'you want any help?" she called out. There was no answer. There was a sound of sizzling in the back room. She played again. But the voice of the man crying under the window disturbed her, and she got up and went to the door of the kitchen.

Her sister stood in the kitchen; she held a frying-pan; she was prodding something with a fork.

"D'you want me to help you?" said Sara.

Maggie shook her head.

"Go on singing," she said.

Sara sat down at the small upright piano and began strumming. Then she threw her head back slightly and began to sing.

"Go search the valleys; pluck up every rose," she sang. She had very little voice. A jerky intermittent sound issued from her throat. And the man, who had reached the end of the street, now turned and was bawling under the window. She stopped singing. Maggie came in with a handful of knives and forks and began distributing them on the table which was laid for lunch.

"Why don't you go on singing?" she said.

"What's the use," said Sara, "if one hasn't got a voice?"

She turned on the music-stool and watched her sister arranging the table.

"That's very nice," she said after a time.

Maggie stopped and looked at the table too.

"No," she said. "It's wrong."

Sara looked at the table again.

"What's wrong," she said. "It seems to me all right—except for that man crying under the window," she added, and struck the piano rather sharply. "Old iron to sell, old iron to sell," she croaked in imitation of his voice. She added a few growling notes in the bass.

"Tumblers," said Maggie. "That's what I've forgotten." She went into the kitchen and came back with three tumblers. Then she pulled the flowers out of a little earthenware pot, in which the potter had tied loosely a bow of blue, and began to arrange them again. They were differently coloured: blue, white and purple!

"Go search the valleys, pluck up every rose," Sara hummed as she sat watching her. Then she looked at the table and began to laugh.

"What are you laughing at?" said Maggie absent-

mindedly. She had laid the flowers on the table head by head and was looking at them.

"Dazed in a rapture of contemplation," said Sara, "shading her eyes with peacocks' feathers dipped in morning dew—" she pointed to the table. "Maggie said," she jumped up and pirouetted about the room, "three's the same as two, three's the same as two." She pointed to the table upon which three places had been laid.

"But we are three," said Maggie. "Rose is coming." Sara stopped. Her face fell.

"Rose is coming?" she repeated. She made a dramatic gesture of despair.

"I told you," said Maggie. "I said to you, Rose is coming to luncheon on Friday. It is Friday. And Rose is coming to luncheon. Any minute now," she said. She got up and began to fold some stuff that was lying on the floor.

"It is Friday, and Rose is coming to luncheon," Sara repeated.

"I told you," said Maggie. "I was in a shop. I was buying stuff. And somebody—" she paused to make her fold accurately—"came out from behind a counter and said, 'I'm your cousin. I'm Rose,' she said. 'Can I come and see you? Any day, any time,' she said. So I said," she put the stuff on a chair, "lunch."

She looked round the room to see that everything was in readiness. Chairs were missing.

"Pull up the chairs," she said. She pulled forward one chair; Sara took another.

"Rose is coming," she said, "and this is where she'll sit." She placed the chair at the table facing the window. "There. And she'll take off her gloves; and she'll lay one on this side, one on that. And she'll say, 'I've never been in this part of London before.'"

"And then?" said Maggie, looking at the table.

"You'll say 'It's so convenient for the theatres.'"

"And then?" said Maggie.

"And then she'll say with rather a wistful smile, putting her head on one side, 'D'you often go to the theatre, Maggie?'"

"No," said Maggie. "You've got it wrong. Rose has red hair."

"Red hair?" Sara exclaimed. "I thought it was grey—a little wisp straggling from under a black bonnet," she added.

"No," said Maggie. "She has a great deal of hair; and it's red."

"Red hair; red Rose," said Sara. She laughed.

"Rose of the flaming heart; Rose of the burning breast; Rose of the weary world"—she spun round on her toes—"red, red Rose!"

A door slammed below; they heard footsteps mounting the stairs. "There she is," said Maggie.

"Now," she added, looking at her sister. "What are we going to say?"

The steps stopped. They heard a voice saying, "Still further up? On the very top? Thank you." Then the steps began mounting the stairs again.

"This is the worst torture," Sara murmured, screwing her hands together, "that life inflicts."

"Bosh," said Maggie. "There are millions much worse."

The steps stopped outside; the door opened and Rose came in. She felt very shy as she came forward.

"It's ages since we met," she said, shaking hands.

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She glanced round her. "I haven't seen Sally since she was a little girl," she said. She wondered what had made her come. Everything was different from what she expected. The room was rather poverty-stricken; the carpet did not cover the floor. There was a sewing-machine in the corner, and Maggie looked different from what she had looked in the shop. She recognised a great crimson-and-gilt chair with relief.

"That used to stand in the hall, didn't it?" she said, putting her bag down on the chair.

"Yes," said Maggie.

"And that glass—" said Rose, looking at the old Italian glass blurred with spots that hung between the windows, "wasn't that there too?"

"Yes," said Maggie, "in my mother's bedroom."

There was a pause. There seemed to be nothing to say.

"What nice rooms you've found!" Rose continued.

It was a large room and the door-posts had little carvings on them. The mantelpiece was also carved and was made of some kind of veined, grey stone. "But don't you find it rather noisy?" Rose continued.

The man was crying under the window. She looked out of the window. Opposite there was a row of slate roofs, like half-opened umbrellas; and, rising high above them was a great building which, save for thin black strokes across it, seemed to be made entirely of glass. It was some kind of factory. The man bawled in the street underneath.

"Yes, it's noisy," said Maggie. "But it's very convenient."

"Very convenient for the theatres," said Sara, as she put down the meat.

"So I remember finding," said Rose, turning to look at her, "when I lived here myself."

"Did you live here?" said Maggie, beginning to help the cutlets.

"Not here, in Hyams Place," she said, "but just round the corner. With a friend."

"That's odd," said Sara. "We thought you lived in Abercorn Terrace."

"But can't one live in more places than one?" Rose asked. "I lived in Abercorn Terrace till I grew up."

"Yes," said Maggie. "I remember Abercorn Terrace." She paused. "There was a long room; and a tree at the end; and a picture over the fireplace, of a girl with red hair?"

Rose nodded. "Mamma when she was young," she said.

"And a round table in the middle?" Maggie continued.

Rose nodded.

"And you had a parlourmaid with very prominent, blue eyes?"

"Crosby. She's still with us."

They ate in silence.

"And then?" said Sara.

"And then?" said Rose. "Well then"—she looked at Maggie, thinking of her as a little girl—"I suppose we all had tea?" She saw them sitting round the table. A little detail that she had not thought of for years came back to her.

"We had a kettle that wouldn't boil," she said, "and Milly used to fray the wick with a hairpin." She laughed. Then she was silent. She thought of herself as a child. She saw herself going up to Eleanor and saying,

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"Eleanor, I want to go to Lamley's."

"Was Milly the one who married the Irishman?" Maggie asked.

"No, that was Delia. Milly married a man called Gibbs and they live in Devonshire," said Rose.

"I remember Uncle Abel," said Maggie. "He gave me a necklace; he hadn't any fingers."

"He had stumps," said Sara. "They were shiny."

"He's still alive," said Rose.

They talked, she thought, as if Abercorn Terrace were a scene in a play. They talked as if they were speaking of people who were real, but not real in the way in which she felt herself to be real. It puzzled her; it made her feel that she was two different people at the same time; that she was living at two different times at the same moment. She saw herself as a little girl wearing a pink frock; for some reason she wanted to go on talking about her childhood. But there was a great rattle under the windows. A dray went roaring past. The glasses jingled on the table. She started slightly, roused from her thoughts about her childhood, and separated the glasses.

"Don't you find it very noisy here?" she said.

"Yes. But very convenient for the theatres," said Sara.

Rose looked up. She had repeated herself. She thinks me an old fool, Rose thought, making the same remark twice over. She blushed slightly. They were much younger than she was.

"Clear away the plates and fetch the pudding," said Maggie. Sara got up and left the room. Rose took off her hat and flung it on the floor.

"That's better," she said as she ran her fingers through her hair. Maggie looked at her with approval. Now that she had taken her hat off and rumpled her hair she was handsome in a manly way, though the clothes she was wearing were ugly.

"And Delia—" Maggie went on as they waited, "Delia married an Irishman; isn't there one called Morris?"

"Yes," said Rose. "Morris is a barrister; and Edward—" she began. Sara came in with the pudding.

"Oh, blasted eyes of my deceased wife's sister, withered prop of my defunct old age," she said, putting down the pudding—"that's Edward. A quotation from a book he gave me. My wasted youth—my wasted youth," she said, flinging out her hand. The words were her own, but the voice was Edward's. She had imitated him very well. Rose laughed.

"There's not much of 'my wasted youth' about Edward now," she said.

"Go on, Rose," said Maggie, helping the pudding.

"Go on telling us about the Pargiters."

"About the Pargiters?" said Rose. "It's too dreary," she said. She saw herself running along the broad avenue in the lamplight.

"What could be more ordinary?" she said. "A large family, living in a large house . . ." And yet she felt that she had been herself very interesting. She paused. Sara looked at her.

"It's not ordinary," she said. "The Pargiters—" She was holding a fork in her hand, and she drew a line on the table-cloth. "The Pargiters," she repeated, "going on and on and on"—here her fork touched a salt-cellar—"until they come to a rock," she said; "and then Rose"—she looked at her again: Rose drew

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herself up slightly, "—Rose claps spurs to her horse, rides straight up to a man in a gold coat, and says 'Damn your eyes! Isn't that Rose, Maggie?' she said, looking at her sister as if she had been drawing her picture on the table-cloth.

"Yes," said Maggie.

"She make's me out much more romantic than I am," said Rose, looking at Maggie too. "I'm not romantic," she added.

She passed her hand deprecatingly over her knee as Maggie looked at her.

"This is a tailor-made suit for which I gave five pound ten three years ago in the Westbourne Grove," she said, as if Maggie had asked her about her clothes.

"I don't know," said Maggie, helping the pudding, and looking at her.

Perhaps I am romantic, Rose thought to herself as she took her pudding. Again she had the odd feeling of being two people at the same time.

"Well, that's done," said Maggie, pushing away her plate. "Come and sit in the armchair, Rose," she said.

She went over to the fireplace and pulled out an armchair, which had springs like hoops, Rose noticed, in the seat. They had not been left well off, she remembered, as she sat down.

"Go and make the coffee," Maggie said, and Sara went into the kitchen again. Rose looked about her.

"You make your own clothes?" she said, pointing to the sewing-machine in the corner. There was silk folded on it.

"Yes," said Maggie, looking at the sewing-machine.

"For a party?" said Rose. The stuff was green, with blue rays on it.

"Tomorrow night," said Maggie. She raised her hand with a curious gesture to her face. Then she got up and fetched the silk and spread it on her knee.

"D'you mind," she said, "if I go on?" She drew the machine to her, and threaded the needle. Rose watched her.

"I never could make my own clothes," she said. She began to feel at her ease, as she watched her smoothing out the stuff, and beginning, rather cautiously, to turn the handle. Something went wrong. She smoothed out the silk again.

" . . . but then you did other things," said Maggie.

Now it worked all right. The machine made a comfortable whirring now. Rose lit a cigarette and watched her.

" . . . when you lived down here," said Maggie, speaking in the preoccupied way of a person who is using her hands. A cat came in and stretched itself against Rose's knee. She stroked it, but a little roughly.

"That was years ago," she said, "when I was young. I lived here with a friend," she said. "A friend who married." She sighed.

"I taught little thieves," she went on.

Maggie said nothing.

"I always liked thieves better than other people," Rose added after a time.

"Yes," said Maggie.

"I never liked being at home," said Rose. "I liked being on my own much better."

"Yes," said Maggie.

She went on talking.

The door opened and Sara brought in the coffee.

"What was that about clinging to a fat man in the

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Campagna?" she asked.

"About the Campagna? There was nothing at all," said Rose.

Sara poured out coffee.

"Heard through a door, talk sounds very odd," she said, giving Rose her cup. "I thought you were saying how you'd seen the Dome of St. Peter's..."

"I was telling Maggie how I used to live in the Waterloo Road," said Rose.

What had she been saying? she wondered. She had been talking quite easily, about one thing after another. "All talk would be nonsense, I suppose," she said, stirring her coffee, "if it were written down."

"And even if it isn't," said Maggie, smiling at her.

"Yes," said Rose. Probably she had been talking nonsense. "But then it's the only way we have of knowing each other," she said. She stroked the cat. She looked up. She saw the clock. It was later than she thought.

"I must go," she said. She wanted to stay; but she had an appointment. She wanted to stay. She wanted to talk about her childhood. But it was later than she thought; the clock struck.

"I must go," she said. "But why don't you come with me?" she added on the spur of the moment.

"Where?" said Maggie, staying her hand on the wheel of the sewing machine.

Rose felt suddenly shy. "To a meeting," she said. For some reason she wanted to conceal it. "You could wait upstairs," she added. "You'd see Eleanor; you'd see Martin—the caravan crossing the desert," she said, looking at Sara with a smile. She was balancing herself on the arm of a chair, sipping her coffee just as Eugénie used, Rose remembered. And yet they were so different.

"Shall I come?" said Sara, looking vaguely into her cup.

"If you like," said Rose.

"But should I like it," Sara continued, "... this meeting? What do you think, Maggie?" she said, appealing to her sister. "Shall I go or shan't I go? Shall I go or shan't I?" She swung her foot up and down.

"You'll have to hurry if you're coming," said Rose. She had risen.

"All right," said Sara, "I'll fling on my clothes and come."

She sprang up and went into the bedroom. She's like one of those birds at the Zoo, Rose thought, that never flies but hops rapidly across the grass—not that there was any deformity left, she noticed.

She turned to the window. It was a depressing little street, she thought. There was a public-house at the corner. The houses opposite looked very dingy, and it was very noisy. "Any old iron to sell?" the man was crying under the window, "any old iron?" Children were screaming in the road; they were playing a game with chalk-marks on the pavement. She stood there looking down on them.

"Poor little wretches!" she said. She picked up her hat and ran two bonnet-pins sharply through it. "Don't you find it rather unpleasant," she said, giving her hat a little pat on one side as she looked in the looking-glass, "coming home late at night sometimes with that public-house at the corner?"

"Drunken men, you mean?" said Maggie.

"Yes," said Rose. She buttoned the row of leather buttons on her tailor-made suit and gave herself a little

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pat here and there, as if she were making ready.

"And now what are you talking about?" said Sara, coming in carrying her shoes. "Another visit to Italy?"

"No," said Maggie. She spoke indistinctly because her mouth was full of pins. "Drunken men following one."

"Drunken men following one," said Sara. She sat down and began to put on her shoes.

"But they don't follow me," she said. Rose smiled. That was obvious. She was sallow, angular and plain.

"I can walk over Waterloo Bridge at any hour of the day or night," she continued, tugging at her shoe-laces, "and nobody notices." The shoe-lace was in a knot; she fumbled with it. "But I can remember," she continued, "being told by a woman—a very beautiful woman—she was like—"

"Hurry up," Maggie interrupted. "Rose is waiting."

"... Rose is waiting—well, the woman told me, when she went into Regent's Park to have an ice"—she stood up, trying to fit her shoe on to her foot, "—to have an ice, at one of those little tables under the trees, one of those little round tables laid with a cloth under the trees"—she hopped about with one shoe off and one shoe on—"the eyes, she said, came through every leaf like the darts of the sun; and her ice was melted. ... Her ice was melted!" she repeated, tapping her sister on the shoulder as she twirled round on her toe.

Rose held out her hand. "You're going to stay and finish your dress?" she said. "You won't come with us?" It was Maggie she wanted to come.

"No, I won't come," said Maggie, shaking hands. "I should hate it," she added, sitting down again.

Did she mean me? thought Rose as she went down the stairs. Did she mean that she hated me?

"Hyam," she said, looking up at the house as they came out. "Who's Hyam?" The name Hyams Place and the date 1780 were carved on the corner of the crescent. She had always thought when she lived there that he had been a planter who had made money and determined to plan out London on a grand scale. But the crescent was now only a fragment.

"Who was Hyam?" she asked as they walked down the street. "I've always wondered."

There was no time, however, to discuss the point, for they came almost at once out into the broad and crowded thoroughfare which led to Waterloo Bridge. Rose stopped and looked round. Was there a bus in sight? At the moment there were only vans, cabs and lorries. Perhaps it would be quicker to walk, she thought. There was a block; the traffic looked like a puzzle that has been solved for a moment; all the pieces stood still in position. Then the traffic moved on, and the puzzle was broken up into separate pieces again.

"I'm thinking, would it be quicker to walk, or quicker to wait for a bus?" she said. "Quicker to walk," she decided, and started off at a brisk pace across the bridge. There was something I should have liked to tell her, Rose thought as she walked. But it was impossible, she thought. She did not know why it was that she still felt still so queerly divided. She felt that she was a grown woman; and a child; and that there was a gap between. Here she stopped in one of the alcoves built out of the bridge and waited for Sara to

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come up. She had lagged behind. They both stood for a moment looking down into the water beneath them. The river swam past; barges laden with corn were coming down the stream, drawn by a little tug. It was a windy day and the water broke round the bows of the tug and waves went dashing against the Embankment.

"It's a wonderful view," said Rose. She turned. There was St. Paul's on one side and the white, city churches; on the other the fretted spires of Westminster, and the vast mass of the Houses of Parliament planted majestically on the flat. The barges tied with black tarpaulins out of which the yellow corn was bursting came under the bridge.

"I like the river," Sara murmured, leaning over the balustrade to watch the barges pass underneath. She gazed down into the water. It swam past, swollen, purple, now smooth, now rough.

"Yes, but we can't stand here all day," said Rose. She gave her arm a little jerk.

They walked on to the corner of Wellington Place in silence.

"This is where we get our bus," Rose said, laying her hand on Sara's arm. The great omnibuses were swooping down one on top of another.

"Not that one," she said, restraining Sara. "This one, that's coming now."

They dropped into the seats precipitately, for the omnibus jerked on immediately. It was almost full, and they were separated. A man swung himself on board and stood between them, hanging on by the strap. What was it that I was thinking? Rose thought. What was that queer sensation? It was something to do with being two people; a child and a woman; and something that came between. She looked vaguely at the houses as they swept up the incline. She was two people. ...

"Any more fares?" said the conductor.

"Two to Holborn," she said, holding out her coppers. I'm Rose, she said to herself, as she gave them him. The division was over. She was glad. I'm Rose she said to herself. She turned to listen to what they were saying. The conductor was talking to the man on the strap as if they had met before.

"He said to me, 'Come upstairs and have a drink,'" the man was saying. But how could they have met before, Rose wondered. There was something about bus-conductor humour that always tickled her fancy. They were never serious for a moment; they cocked their heads on one side like perky little sparrows. Even when they're at home, do they, she wondered, when they're talking to their wives? Everybody was listening. The conductor, conscious of public approval, smacked his friend on the back and went upstairs. And now, Rose thought, what about my speech? What am I going to say?

She saw the room to which she was going; the green baize table; the blotting-paper; she saw Mr Pickford sitting in front of her with his clean-shaven, lawyer's face. The great thing is, she thought, to let him have his say first. Then I shall say ... her lips moved; she had rehearsed her speech in her bath that morning. I shall say, more or less, this ... she said.

Then he will say ... Then I shall say ... She smiled. And that'll clinch the matter, she thought. The bus stopped and she jumped up.

"We get out here," she said, touching Sally on the

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shoulder. In thinking of her speech, she had forgotten her.

"It's about ten minutes' walk," she said. "This way," she guided her. They walked for about ten minutes in silence until they came to a row of posts leading into an old square.

"Here I leave you," said Sara. She stopped.

"Don't be a fool!" said Rose. She grasped her arm firmly. Sara stood there smiling, holding onto one of the little posts. Rose dropped her arm.

"Is this the square where you meet?" said Sara, walking on.

The noise of the traffic had ceased. The square was very quiet and misty; the trees were not in full leaf yet, but dotted with little buds. Pigeons were shuffling and crooning on the tree-tops. Little bits of twig fell on the pavement as the birds fidgeted among the branches.

"Yes," said Rose. "that's the house over there." She pointed to a house in the corner. There were a great many names on the door, for the house had been cut up into flats and offices. Some were the names of societies; others were the names of private people. Rose stopped on the door-step.

"Are you coming or aren't you?" she said to Sara. She was determined not to touch her again. "It's already begun," she added, as Sara paused. The windows on the ground floor were open. The curtain blew in and out and they could see a row of heads; the heads of people sitting round a table.

"All right!" said Sara, waving her hand. "Ride on!"

Eleanor was sitting at the side of the table, drawing on her blotting-paper. She looked up as they came in. Here's Rose, she said to herself; but who's that with her? She did not recognise her at first. Whoever it was, was waved by Rose to a seat in a corner, and the meeting went on.

Miriam Parrish was reading a letter. Eleanor went on blackening the strokes on her blotting-paper. I've heard all this, I've done all this so often before, she thought, as Miriam, looking very earnest and holding the paper close to her nose, went on reading. Why must we do it? Eleanor said to herself, digging a little hole in the blotting-paper. She looked up. Someone was rattling a stick along the railings and whistling. The branches of a tree swung up and down in the garden outside. The leaves were already unfolding; here and there one was spread out like a hand, semi-transparent. People's faces even seemed to repeat themselves. There's the Judd type; there's the Lazenby type; there's the Miriam type. And there's Martin; and there's Rose, she thought looking at them.

She leant back in her chair and laid down her pencil. I know what Martin's going to say, and I know what Spicer's going to say, she thought. Miriam put down her papers. Mr Spicer rose.

There's no other way of doing it, I suppose, she thought, taking up her pencil again. She made a note as Mr Spicer spoke. She found that her pencil could take notes quite accurately while she herself thought of something else. She seemed able to divide herself into two. One person followed the argument—and he's putting it very well, she thought; while the other, for it was a fine afternoon, and she had wanted to go to Kew, walked down a green glade and stopped in front

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of a flowering tree. Is this a magnolia? she asked herself, or are they already over? Magnolias, she remembered, have no leaves, but masses of white blossoms without any leaves. She drew a line—a leaf.

Now Pickford . . . she said, looking up again. Mr Pickford spoke. She took up her pencil; she drew more spokes; she blackened them. Then she looked up for there was a change in the voice.

"I know Westminster very well," Miss Ashford was saying.

"So do I!" said Mr Pickford. "I've lived there for forty years."

Eleanor looked at him with surprise. She had always thought he lived at Ealing. He lived at Westminster, did he? He was a clean-shaven, dapper little man, whom she had always seen in her mind's eye running to catch a train with a newspaper under his arm. But he lived at Westminster, did he? How little one knows, she thought.

Then they went on arguing again. The cooing of the pigeons became audible. Martin was speaking. Take two coos, take two coos, tak . . . they were saying. And he speaks very well, she thought . . . but he shouldn't be sarcastic; it puts people's backs up. She drew another stroke.

Then she heard the rush of a car outside; it stopped outside the window. Martin had stopped speaking. There was a momentary pause. Then the door opened and in came a tall woman in evening dress. Everybody looked up.

"Lady Lasswade!" said Mr Pickford, getting up and scraping back his chair.

"Kitty!" Eleanor exclaimed. She half rose, but she sat down again. There was a little stir. A chair was found for her. She took her place opposite Eleanor.

"I'm so sorry," she apologised, "to be so late. And for coming in these ridiculous clothes," she added, touching her cloak. She did look strange, dressed in evening dress in the broad daylight. There was something shining in her hair.

"The Opera?" said Martin as she sat down beside him.

"Yes," she said briefly. She laid her white gloves in a businesslike way on the table. Her cloak opened and showed the gleam of a silver dress beneath. She did look odd compared with the others; but it's very good of her to come, Eleanor thought, looking at her, considering she's going on to the Opera. The meeting began again.

How long has she been married? Eleanor thought, looking at her. How long is it since we broke the swing together at Oxford? She drew on the blotting-paper another stroke.

" . . . and we discussed the whole matter perfectly frankly," Kitty was saying. Eleanor listened. That's the manner I like, she thought; it's so easy; so natural. She had been meeting Sir Edward at dinner. . . . It's the great ladies' manner, Eleanor thought . . . but the Righys are just as old a family as the Lasswades, she thought; didn't Mamma always say so? Only they never did anything in particular. She listened again. It charms Mr Pickford; but it irritates Martin, she thought. He was pooh-poohing Sir Edward and his frankness. Then Mr Spicer was off again. And Kitty had joined in. Now there was Rose. They were all at loggerheads. Eleanor listened. She became more and more irritated. All it

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comes to is: I'm right and you're wrong, she thought. This bickering merely wasted time. If we could only get at something deeper, she thought, prodding her pencil on the blotting-paper. Suddenly she saw the only point that was of any importance. They had all passed it over. She had the words on the tip of her tongue. She opened her mouth to speak. But just as she cleared her throat, Mr Pickford swept his papers together and rose. Would they pardon him? he said. He had to be at the Law Courts. He rose and went.

When he had gone they all argued in little groups. The ash-tray in the middle of the table became full of cigarette-stumps; the air became thick with smoke. Then Mr Spicer went; Miss Bodham went; Miss Ashford wound a scarf tightly round her neck, snapped her attaché-case to, and strode out of the room. Miriam Parrish took off her pince-nez and fixed them to a hook that was sewn onto the front of her dress. Everybody was going; the meeting was over. Eleanor got up. She wanted to speak to Kitty. But Miriam intercepted her. "About coming to see you on Wednesday," she began.

"Yes," said Eleanor.

"I've just remembered I've promised to take a niece to the dentist," said Miriam.

"Saturday would suit me just as well," said Eleanor.

Miriam paused. She pondered.

"Would Monday do instead?" she said.

"I'll write," said Eleanor with an irritation that she could not conceal, and Miriam fluttered away with a guilty air as if she were a little dog caught stealing.

Eleanor turned. The others were still arguing.

"You'll agree with me one of these days," Martin was saying.

"Never! Never!" said Kitty, slapping her gloves on the table. She looked very handsome; at the same time rather absurd.

"Why didn't you speak, Nell?" she said, turning on her.

"Because—" Eleanor began, "I don't know," she added, rather feebly. She felt suddenly shabby and dowdy compared with Kitty, standing there in full evening dress with something shining in her hair.

"Well," said Kitty, turning away. "I must be off. But can't I give anyone a lift?" she said, pointing to the window. There was her car.

"What a magnificent car!" said Martin, looking at it, with a sneer in his voice.

"It's Charlie's," said Kitty rather sharply.

"No, thanks," said Martin. "I shall walk."

"What about you, Eleanor?" said Kitty, turning to her.

"Thanks," said Eleanor: "—just one moment."

She had muddled her things up. She had left her gloves somewhere. Had she brought an umbrella, or hadn't she? She felt flustered and dowdy, as if she were a schoolgirl suddenly. There was the magnificent car waiting, and a chauffeur holding the door open with a rug in his hand.

"Get in," said Kitty. And she got in and the chauffeur put the rug over her knees.

"We'll leave them caballing," said Kitty, with a wave of her hand, and the car drove off.

"What a pig-headed set they are!" said Kitty, turning to Eleanor.

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"What a pig-headed set," she repeated, drawing the rug over her knees. There she sat very upright. She was still under the influence of the meeting. The car drew on smoothly and swiftly.

Eleanor wanted to talk. They met so seldom. "Tell me—" she began. But almost before she knew where she was, she saw the Tube station where she wanted to get out. The engine was so powerful; they had swept in and out of the traffic so smoothly, that here they were before she had time to say any of the things she wanted. Yet they met so seldom. "Would he stop there—?" she said, putting out her hand.

"But must you get out?" Kitty began. She had wanted to talk to her. She had been thinking of the meeting. "I must, I must," said Eleanor. "Papa's expecting me." She felt like a child again beside this great lady and the footman, who was holding the door open.

"Do come and see me—do let us meet again soon, Nell," said Kitty, taking her hand.

The car started on again. Lady Lasswade sat back in her corner. She wished she saw more of Eleanor, she thought; but she never could get her to come and dine. It was always "Papa's expecting me" or some other excuse, she thought rather bitterly. But she was still thinking of the meeting. The car slowed down. It had to take its place in the long line of cars that were moving at a foot's pace, now stopping dead, now jerking on, down the narrow street, blocked by market carts, that led to the Opera House. Men and women in full evening dress were walking along the pavement. They looked uncomfortable and self-conscious as they dodged between costers' barrows, with their high piled hair and their evening cloaks; with their button-holes and their white waistcoats in the glare of the afternoon sun. The ladies tripped uncomfortably on their high-heeled shoes; putting their hands to their heads. The gentlemen kept close beside them as though protecting them. It's an absurd spectacle, Kitty thought—ridiculous to come out in full evening dress at this time of day. She leant back in her corner. I don't believe in force, she said, speaking to Martin. Covent Garden porters, dingy little clerks in their ordinary working clothes, coarse-looking women in aprons stared in at her. The air smelt strongly of oranges and bananas. No, I don't believe . . . she began, but the car was coming to a standstill. It drew up under the archway; she pushed through the glass doors and went in.

She felt at once a sense of relief. Now that the daylight was extinguished and the air glowed yellow and crimson, she no longer felt absurd. On the contrary, she threw her cloak open and straightened herself. The ladies and gentlemen who were mounting the stairs looked festive and appropriate. The smell of oranges and bananas had been replaced by another smell—a subtle mixture of clothes and gloves and flowers that affected her pleasantly. The carpet was thick beneath her feet. She went along the corridor till she came to her own box with the card on it. She went in and the whole Opera House opened in front of her. She was not late after all. The orchestra was still tuning up; the players were laughing and talking and turning round in their seats as they fiddled busily with their instru-

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ments. The conductor had not yet come in. She stood up, looking down at the stalls. The floor of the house was in a state of great agitation. People were passing to their seats; they were sitting down and getting up again; they were taking off their cloaks and signalling to friends. In the boxes white figures were appearing here and there; white arms were resting on the ledges of boxes; white shirt-fronts were appearing beside them. The whole house glowed—red, gold, cream-coloured, and smelt of clothes and flowers, and echoed with the squeaks and trills of the instruments and with the buzz and hum of voices. She glanced at the programme that was laid on the ledge of her box. It was *Siegfried*—her favourite opera. In a little space within the highly decorated border the names of the cast were given. She stooped to read them; then a thought struck her. They were saying at luncheon he was better, she thought. She glanced at the royal box. It was empty. As she looked the door opened and two men came in; one was her cousin Edward; the other was a boy, a cousin of her husband's.

"They haven't put it off?" he said as he shook hands. "I was afraid they might." He was something in the Foreign Office; with a handsome Roman head.

"Is he as bad as all that?" said Edward. They all looked instinctively at the royal box. Programmes lay along the edge; but there was no bouquet of pink carnations.

The box was empty.

"Charles was saying at lunch that they thought him better," said Kitty.

"No. The doctors have given him up," said the young man, looking very important. Kitty smiled. They all think they know everything, Kitty thought, smiling at his air of private information.

"Yes. He's sinking," said the young man, shaking his head. He took up his programme.

"But if he dies?" said Lady Lasswade, looking at the royal box, "d'you think they'll stop it?"

The young man shrugged his shoulders. About that he could not be positive apparently. The house was filling up. Lights winked on ladies' arms as they turned; ripples of light flashed, stopped, and then flashed the opposite way as they turned their heads.

"Lady Polehampton," said Kitty, smiling and bowing. Edward followed her glance as it rested upon a stout lady wearing splendid diamonds, groomed and shining like a thorough-bred horse in the box opposite.

"Is that her?" said Edward, raising his glasses. At that moment the conductor pushed his way through the orchestra to his raised seat. There was a general outburst of applause; he turned and bowed to the audience; then he turned his back to them. All the lights sank down; the overture had begun.

Kitty leant back against the wall of the box so that her face was sheltered by the folds of the curtain. She was glad to be shaded. She had been going from place to place; now she could stop. She was glad that she need not speak until the first act was over. She was not musical; she could not keep her mind fixed on this phrase, then on that, and then combine them into one intelligible whole as musical people did, she supposed. As they played the overture she looked at Edward, who was looking down at his hands. She could only see the outline of his face in the red glow; it was heavier than it used to be. But he looked intellectual and handsome and a little remote as he listened to the overture. It wouldn't have done, she thought; I'm much too . . .

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she did not finish the sentence. He never married, she thought; and she had. And I've three boys. I've been in Australia, I've been in India. . . . The music made her think of herself and her own life as she seldom did. It seemed to exalt her; to cast a flattering light over her own past. But why did Martin laugh at me for having a car? she thought. But then he laughs at everybody; and what's the good of laughing, she asked.

Here the curtain went up. She leant forward and looked at the stage. The dwarf was hammering at the sword. Hammer, hammer, hammer, he went with his little short, sharp strokes. She listened. The music had changed. And what does it mean, this change in the music? she wondered. *He*, she thought, looking at the handsome boy, knows exactly. . . . He was already completely possessed by the music. She liked the look of complete absorption that had swum up on top of his immaculate respectability, making him seem almost stern. . . . But here was Siegfried. She leant forward. Here he was, dressed in leopard-skins, very fat, with nut-brown thighs, leading a bear. She smiled. She liked the fat bouncing young man in his flaxen wig; his voice was magnificent. Hammer, hammer, hammer he went. She leant back again. What did it make her think of? A young man who came into a room with shavings in his hair . . . when she was very young. In Oxford? She had gone to tea with them—what was their name—and had sat on a hard chair; in a very light room; and there was a sound of hammering in the garden. And then a boy came in with shavings in his hair. And she had wanted him to kiss her. Yes, she had wanted him—the sensation came back to her—to throw his arm round her and kiss her. Or was it the farm hand up at Carter's, when old Carter had loomed up suddenly leading a bull with a ring through its nose?

"That's the sort of life I like," she thought, taking up her opera-glasses. "That's the sort of person I am. . . ."

Then she put the opera-glasses to her eyes. The scenery suddenly became bright and close; the grass seemed to be made of thick green wool; she could see Siegfried's fat brown arms glistening with paint. His face was shiny. She put down the glasses and leant back in her corner.

And old Lucy Craddock she thought—there was her little room, with the shiny notebooks, and the oranges in a plate, and Lucy sitting at a table; with her red nose and her patient, kind eyes looking up and saying reproachfully, "So you've done no work this week again, Kitty!" How I loved her! Kitty thought. And then she had gone back to the Lodge; and there was the tree, with a prop in the middle; and her mother sitting bolt upright. . . . I wish I hadn't quarrelled so much with my mother, she thought, overcome with a sudden sense, of the passage of time and its tragedy. Then the music changed.

She looked at the stage again. The Wanderer had come in. He was sitting on a bank in a long grey dressing-gown; and a patch wobbled uncomfortably over one of his eyes. On and on he went; on and on. It was very dull. Her attention flagged. She glanced round the dim red house; she could only see white elbows pointed on the ledges of boxes; here and there a sharp pin-point of light showed as some earnest person followed the score with a torch. Edward's fine profile again caught her eye. He was listening, critic-

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ally, intently. It wouldn't have done, she thought, it wouldn't have done at all.

At last the Wanderer had gone. And now? she asked herself, leaning forward. Siegfried burst in. Dressed in his leopard-skins, laughing and singing, here he was again. She sat up. The music excited her. It was magnificent; it was very exciting. Siegfried took up the broken pieces of the sword and blew up the fire and hammered and hammered and hammered. The singing and the hammering and the fire leaping all went on at the same time. Quicker and quicker, with more and more of a swing, it went; more and more rhythmically; more and more triumphantly he hammered, until at last he swung the sword over his head and brought it down—crack! The anvil burst asunder. And then he brandished the sword over his head and shouted and sang; and the music rushed higher and higher; and the curtain fell.

The lights opened in the middle of the house. All the colour came back. The whole Opera House leapt into life again with its faces and its diamonds and its men and women. They were clapping and waving their programmes. The whole house seemed to be fluttering with white squares of paper. The curtains fell apart and were held back by tall footmen in knee-breeches. Kitty stood up and clapped. Again the curtains closed; again they parted. The footmen were almost pulled off their feet by the heavy folds that they had to hold back. Again and again they held the curtain back; and even when they had let it fall and the singers had disappeared and the orchestra were leaving their seats, the audience still stood clapping and waving their programmes.

Kitty turned to the young man in her box. He was leaning over the ledge, still clapping. He was shouting "Bravo! Bravo!" He had forgotten her. He had forgotten himself. Then he drew back.

"Wasn't that marvellous?" he said.

There was an odd look on his face as if he were in two worlds at once as he looked at her.

She said "Marvellous. And now," she added, gathering her things together, "we must go and have dinner."

They had finished dinner in Hyams Place.

They had cleared the table and put the dirty plates in the sink for Mrs Parsons to wash up. It was still daylight; there was still light enough to sew by, and Maggie had her dress on her knee.

"Sing something," she said.

"What's the use of singing if one hasn't any voice?" said Sara.

But she went obediently to the piano and began to play. It was an eighteenth-century march, which sounded rather pompous and florid.

"Brandishing, flourishing my sword in my hand . . ." she sang.

Her voice was rather reedy and thin.

"I come; I slay; I conquer," she sang. Her voice broke. She stopped singing; but she went on playing without singing. Maggie smoothed out the stuff on her knee. She was thinking of the party tomorrow night. Probably she would have to marry him. She saw his face, with the big nose and the dark eyes: the Frenchman. . . . The music stopped.

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"What did you do today?" she said, looking up abruptly.

"Went out with Rose," said Sara.

"And what did you do with Rose?" said Maggie. She spoke absent-mindedly. Sara turned, looked at her and began to play again. "Stood on the bridge and looked into the water," she said.

"Stood on the bridge and looked into the water," she hummed, in time to the music. "Running water; flowing water. May my bones turn to coral; and fish light their lanterns; fish light their green lanterns; in my eyes." She half turned and looked round at Maggie. Maggie was not attending. She played on in silence. Then she stopped. Maggie looked up.

"You went out with Rose?" she said. "Where to?"

Sara got up and came across to the fireplace. She sat down at her sister's feet on the floor. "We got into a bus," she said. "And Rose said two to Holborn; two to Holborn." She paused. She stroked the cat, who was curled up on the floor. "And then we got out and went along a street," she added. "Suddenly," she jerked her hand out, "I felt a clap on my shoulder. Damned liar! said Rose. And I took her and flung her against the public-house wall!" . . . She looked round. Maggie was not attending.

"You got into a bus and went to Holborn," Maggie repeated mechanically. "And then?"

"Then we went in," Sara continued. "And there they all were, sitting round a table. Multitudes of people . . ." She paused.

"A meeting," Maggie murmured.

"A pale greenish light; a woman hanging clothes on a line in the back garden; and someone went by rattling a stick on the railings," said Sara.

"I see," said Maggie. She stitched quickly, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece. But it's fast, she thought; five minutes fast. "A meeting," she said aloud. "What for? What about?"

"There were pigeons cooing," Sara went on. "Take two coos Taffy. Take two coos. . . . Tak . . . And then a wing darkened the air; and in came Kitty clothed in starlight; and sat on a chair."

She paused. Maggie was silent. She went on stitching for a moment.

"Who came in?" she asked at length.

"Kitty . . . whereupon Mr Pickford got up rather officiously and said, 'Won't you take this chair, Lady Lasswade?' And Lady Lasswade, opening her evening cloak, put down her gloves like that—" She patted the cat.

"Lady Lasswade . . ." Maggie murmured. She had a general impression; a room full of people talking; a stick rattled on the railings; and someone came in dressed in silver.

Then what happened?" she asked.

"Then withered Rose, spiky Rose, tawny Rose, thorny Rose," Sara hummed, "shed a tear."

Maggie put her stuff aside and got up. She was restless. It struck her that it would be improved by a little rim of gold ribbon. She went into the next room to fetch the ribbon. She came back and began stitching the gold ribbon neatly round the edge of the neck.

It was growing dark, and the flare outside the public-house made a yellow glare in the room. It was too dark to go on sewing; but neither of them turned on the light. There was a sound of brawling in the street out-

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side. Probably some drunken man or woman was being thrown out of the public-house. They listened to the hoarse voices in the street below.

"Wild Rose, spiky Rose, tawny Rose . . ." Sara murmured.

"When she took her hat off," said Maggie, putting down her needle, "she was very handsome."

"Ravaged," said Sara. "Scarred."

They sat in silence for a time.

"Do you think so?" said Maggie at last. "Why?" she asked.

"A man?" said Sara. She paused. "She stood at the garden gate, under a shower of white syringa, looking after him down the road."

She paused again and half turned to look up at her sister.

"And then?" said Maggie.

"Then she turned, and shook the white petals from her sleeve."

She sighed, and looked again at her sister.

"No, no," said Maggie, biting off a thread. "Not dressed like that."

"Reach it off the hook, man, put it on my back," Sara hummed.

"Her hands, I meant," said Maggie. "It was a woman," she added.

"Have it your own way, Maggie," said Sara. "It may have been a kitten or it may have been a cat." She stroked the cat again and they sat silent.

"I must turn on the light," said Maggie at length. She got up and turned on the light. She took up her dress and began sewing again. She looked at the clock. There were now less than twenty-four hours to the meeting.

Time was passing. Time passed too quickly. Soon the moment would be on her. She stitched on; then she raised her needle. There was a noise of shouting in the street below. There was a sound of scuffling and feet trampling as if the police were hauling someone along against his will. Voices jeered and shouted after them.

"Another row?" said Maggie.

Sara got up and went to the window.

"A drunken man," she said.

She stood looking down at the little knot of people in the street below. Then she turned.

"In time to come," she said, "people, Maggie, looking into this room—this cave, this little antre, scooped out of mud and dung—will hold their fingers to their noses," she held her fingers to her nose, "and say, 'Pah! They stink!'"

She dropped into the armchair.

Curled up, with her hair falling over her face, she looked, Maggie thought, like some great ape crouching there in the red light from the street. It's true, she thought with a little spasm of disgust; they were nasty creatures driven by uncontrollable lusts. Savages, in a cave of mud. . . . She drove her needle through stuff. She listened. The night was full of roaring and cursing; of violence and unrest. She got up.

"Stand up and let me see this against you," she said.

Sara stood up and Maggie held the dress against her. The folds of silk fell down to the floor and Maggie smoothed them out against her sister.

"That's done. That's finished," she said, laying the dress on the table. It was finished. There was nothing more she could do with her hands. The cat, which had

been asleep, rose very slowly, arched its back and stretched itself to its full length.

"You want your supper, do you?" said Maggie. She went into the kitchen and came back with a saucer of milk. "There, poor puss," she said, putting the saucer down on the floor. She stood watching the cat lap up its milk mouthful by mouthful and then stretch itself out again with extraordinary grace.

"There, poor puss, there poor puss," Sara imitated her—"as you rock the cradle, Maggie."

Maggie sighed. She stooped and picked up the saucer. She went into the kitchen and washed it at the sink. Then she came back.

There was a sound of knocking in the street. Somebody was hammering on the door of the next house. The hammering stopped. Then it began again—hammer, hammer, hammer.

They listened.

"Upcher's come home drunk and wants to be let in," said Maggie after a time. The knocking ceased. Then it began again.

"But she won't let him in," she said.

"Bring up your children on a desert island where the ships only come when the moon's full," said Sara.

"Or have none?" said Maggie. The knocking had ceased. A window was thrown open. A woman's voice was heard shrieking abuse at the man. He bawled back in a thick drunken voice from the doorstep. Then the door slammed.

"She's let him in," said Sara.

"Now he'll stagger against the wall and be sick," said Maggie. They could hear heavy footsteps lurching up the stairs in the next house. Then there was silence.

Maggie crossed the room to shut the window. The great windows of the factory opposite were all lit up; it looked like a palace of glass with thin black bars across it. A glaze of yellow light lit up the lower halves of the houses opposite; then there were the slate roofs, now shining blue, for the sky hung down in a heavy canopy of yellow light. Footsteps tapped on the pavement, for people were still walking in the street. Far off a voice was crying hoarsely. Maggie leant out. The night was windy and warm.

"What's he crying?" she said.

The voice came nearer and nearer.

"Death . . ." she said.

"Death . . ." said Sara. They leant out. But they could not hear the other words. Then a man who was wheeling a barrow along the street shouted up to them:

"The King's dead."

THE train kept stopping and starting. It had left the main line and was puffing its way through Dorset. On every platform there seemed to be a family party, going to the market town for Saturday shopping. There was a great deal of hand-shaking; a great deal of hoisting children in and out of carriages; and a great many last words tolerantly allowed by the guard. Then the train jerked on; the engine puffed out a white cloud of smoke; and the train rattled through fields sprinkled with large red-and-white cows. Men standing on little bridges fishing looked up; sometimes a horse cantered round a field as the train passed. The shadow of the smoke floated over the standing corn. It all looked very spick and span, very neat and small after the vast blue landscapes of Spain.

Eleanor had only been back three days. After Greece she had gone to Rome; she had rambled about Italy; then she had taken a little coasting steamer to Barcelona and had rambled about Spain till it got too hot. Her face was tanned reddish brown all over, except for the little white strokes round her eyes where she had crinkled them up to avoid the glare on the Acropolis, at Naples, at Granada and Toledo. She was coming to spend a week-end with Morris at his mother-in-law's house in the country; and here at last was the station.

She looked along the platform as she hauled down her bag; but there was nobody to meet her. She went out into the station yard and recognised William, the elderly red-faced gardener who drove the victoria. He touched his hat and gave her a note. Her sister-in-law Celia was so sorry . . . but there was a fete and would she mind picking up a few parcels? She took her place in the victoria and they trotted off. It was a roasting-hot afternoon, hotter it seemed even than Toledo. The air was heavier; it seemed to make all the outlines thick and watery. She opened her white umbrella. They had turned into the High Street. All the shops had awnings over them, and people crept along on the shady side of the street. It was extraordinarily drowsy and quiet; the broad street was full of traps and carts with the reins hanging loose and the horses' heads drooping. At the fishmonger's they stopped; and a damp white parcel was handed out to them. At the ironmonger's they stopped; and William came back with a scythe. Then they stopped at the chemist's; but there they had to wait because the lotion was not yet ready.

Eleanor sat back under the shade of her white umbrella sniffing up the smell of soap and chemicals that was wafted out from the open door of the chemist's shop. William sat rather hunched in his buff-coloured coat with the silver-plated crested buttons on the back. The air seemed to hum with the heat. She looked at the yellow soap and the green soap and the pink soap in the chemist's window; there were sponges and nail-brushes, loofahs, rubber gloves and all kinds of facilities for washing oneself. How thoroughly people wash themselves in England, she thought with amusement, but with pleasure. In Spain she had been forced to go without a bath for weeks. She had dried herself with a pocket-handkerchief among the white dry stones of the—was it the Guadalquivir? All was parched and shrivelled, but here, she thought—she looked along the High Street—every shop is full of vegetables; of

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bread and chocolate; of shining silver fish; and yellow-clawed, soft-breasted chickens; full of every kind of bucket, rake and wheel-barrow—it seemed to her that England was teeming with prosperity.

And Dorset is hotter than Spain, she thought, feeling the leather of the carriage hot behind her back. The heat seemed also to make everything leisurely and silent. How quiet it was after the rattle and din of those Spanish market-places! Men in gaiters were leaning against the wall of the County Assembly Rooms. Everybody seemed to know everybody. She noticed how often hats were touched; how often people coming slowly along the street stopped and began to talk, standing in the middle of the road. At last the chemist came out with a large bottle wrapped in tissue paper. It was stowed away under the scythe.

"Midges very bad this year, William?" she asked, recognising the lotion.

"Terrible bad, miss, terrible," he said, touching his hat. There hadn't been such a drought since the Jubilee she understood him to say; but his accent made it difficult to catch what he said. Then he flicked his whip and they drove on.

They trotted past the market cross—a crude piece of carving it looked to her—and past the old red-brick Town Hall with the arches under it and the great clock with the gilt hands; along a street of red eighteenth-century houses with bow windows and brass-edged blinds, the residences of doctors and solicitors. Then they came to the pond, with chains linking white posts together, and a horse drinking; then to spruce red villas and lawns; and then the road became a country road, thickly laid with soft white dust. It was as smooth as a carriage drive, Eleanor thought, used as she was to the deep ruts of Spain. The hedges on either side were wreathed in garlands of traveller's-joy which seemed also heavy, white, thick with dust. The old horse settled into his mechanical jog-trot and Eleanor settled down under the green-and-white umbrella to jog the three miles to Wittering behind him.

This was her annual visit to Morris's mother-in-law's house. They always spent the summer there; and she came down every year for the week-end. Six times, seven times, eight times she had come, she counted, but this year it was different. Everything was different this year. Her father had died in January; Edward had taken her to Greece in the spring for a change. She had no attachment at the moment anywhere. As she jolted along the hot lanes she felt extraordinarily free—freer than she had been since her mother's death. That was in eighteen-eighty; now it was nineteen hundred and eleven. Therefore she was—what was she? Fifty-four, fifty-five? Fifty-five presumably. Yes, fifty-five. As the carriage trundled along she thought idly whether she should like to live in that house with the monkey-puzzle on the lawn; or in that very respectable Georgian, villa that was to let in the middle of the village street. No, not in a village, she said to herself. They passed through the village. What about that elegant little house with a verandah, that she could see standing back among some trees? It had a nice garden; there were hollyhocks and clumps of pampas grass. But then she would turn into a grey-haired lady with a basket and a pair of scissors; into a grey-haired lady who would go round and tap at cottage doors. No, she did not want to tap at cottage doors. And the clergyman—

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they passed a clergyman wheeling his bicycle up the hill, with the ends of his trousers tucked into his socks—would come to tea with her. But she did not want the clergyman to come to tea with her. No doubt he was a very nice man. They had reached the top of the hill; the horse began to trot again. Now they were passing through the village; it was one long eighteenth-century street; the houses were many of them thatched; they had nice little gardens, full of flowers; all very spick and span, she thought, after Spain. They passed through the village, and then they began to meet little groups of village people in their best clothes, the women wheeling perambulators, the old men with white fan-shaped beards, and the children lagging behind with bags of sweets. It was the fête returning. Some of the women carried parcels; there was a gleaming silver object on the quilt of a perambulator. One old man hobbled along clasping a hairy-headed coconut. It reminded Eleanor vaguely of some procession she had seen somewhere—in Greece, in Italy, in Spain? But then there were Madonnas and banners—that was different, she thought. The villagers drew to the side as the carriage trotted past, and cast steady, curious looks at the lady sitting under her white-and-green umbrella. Somewhere to the right she could hear the tap of cricket bats. There was a match going on; she looked at the white figures, at the groups lying in the grass under the elm trees. The heat was still great although the shadows were beginning to lengthen. Now they came to a white gate; trotted briskly down a short avenue; and drew up with a demonstrative flourish of the whip in front of two slender columns, door-scrappers like bristling hedgehogs, and a wide-open hall door.

How cool! Eleanor thought as she got down and went into the paved hall strewn with shabby old rugs. Her eyes were dimmed for a moment after the glare of the road. Everything seemed pale and frail and faded. Now who, she asked herself as she caught sight of the eighteenth-century admiral, with his cocked hat in his hand, over the mantelpiece, who was it stayed here? George the Third when the Court was at Weymouth or one of the characters in one of Jane Austen's novels? She could never remember, though she had been told twenty times. Anyhow it was something to do with the eighteenth century. In Greece one was always going back two thousand years; here it was always the eighteenth century. Like everything English, she thought, laying her umbrella down on the refectory table with its china bowl; the past seemed so near, so shallow, so domestic and friendly. . . .

Her sister-in-law hurried in from the garden in her fly-away summer clothes, distracted, apologetic as usual.

"Oh, Eleanor!" she exclaimed, kissing her. "How very nice to see you! How brown you look! Come and sit in the cool."

She led her into the drawing-room. The drawing-room piano was strewn with white baby-linen, pink and green fruit glimmered in glass bottles.

"We're in such a mess," she said, sinking onto the sofa. "Lady St. Austell has only just this minute gone, and the Bishop."

She fanned herself with a sheet of paper.

"But it's been a great success. We had the bazaar in the garden. They acted." It was a programme with

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which she was fanning herself.

"A play?" said Eleanor.

"Yes, a scene from Shakespeare," said Celia. "*Midsummer-Night? As You Like It?* I forget which. Miss Green got it up. Happily it was so fine. Last year it poured. But how my feet are aching!" The long window opened on to the lawn. Eleanor could see people dragging tables.

"What an undertaking!" she said.

"It was," Celia panted. "We had Lady St. Austell and the Bishop, coco-nut shies and a pig; but I think it all went off very well. They all enjoyed it."

"For the Church?" Eleanor asked.

"Yes. The new steeple," said Celia.

"What a business!" said Eleanor again. She caught sight of Morris dragging a trestle-table across the lawn.

"It was," Celia sighed. "But it was our turn this year. The Robinsons had it last year. And we shan't have to have it again—but there's no need to think about that yet!" She fanned herself with the programme.

"How nice and brown you're looking!" she said, patting Eleanor affectionately on the knee. "Did you enjoy your travels? Was it very hot?"

"Very," said Eleanor. "Toledo—" she began, but Celia did not listen.

"You must tell me all about it afterwards," she said. She got up. "Now I'm sure you must want to wash."

She laughed. Why? Eleanor wondered. Then she remembered, it was the family joke; she was supposed to take three baths every day.

"And it's time we all got ready," said Celia, getting up. "But I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to be careful," she said, toiling rather heavily up the broad staircase, "because we're very short of water. The well . . ." she stopped. The well, Eleanor remembered, always gave out in a hot summer. They walked together down the broad passage, past the old yellow globe which stood under the pleasant eighteenth-century picture of all the little Chinnerys in long drawers and nankeen trousers standing round their father and mother in the garden. Celia paused with her hand on the bedroom door. The sound of doves cooing came in through the open window.

"We're putting you in the Blue room this time," she said. Generally Eleanor had the Pink room. She glanced in. "I hope they've unpacked for you," she said. "I hope you've got everything—"

"Yes, I'm sure I've got everything I want," said Eleanor, and Celia left her.

The maid had already unpacked her things. There they were—laid on the bed. Eleanor took off her dress, and stood in her white petticoat washing herself, methodically but carefully, since they were short of water. The English sun still made her face prickly all over where the Spanish sun had burnt it. Her neck had been cut off from her chest as if it had been painted brown, she thought, as she slipped on her evening dress in front of the looking-glass. She twisted her thick hair, with the grey strand in it, rapidly into a coil; hung the jewel, a red blob like congealed raspberry jam with a gold seed in it, round her neck; and gave one glance at the woman who had been for fifty-five years familiar to her as Eleanor Pargiter. That she was getting

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old was obvious; there were wrinkles across her forehead; hollows and creases where the flesh used to be firm.

And what was my good point? she asked herself, running the comb once more through her hair. My eyes? Her eyes laughed back at her as she looked at them. My eyes, yes, she thought. Somebody once praised my eyes. She made herself open them instead of screwing them together. Round each eye were several little white strokes. But that's over, she thought, and finished her dressing.

She stood for a moment looking at the burnt, dry lawn. The grass was almost yellow; the elm trees were beginning to turn brown; red-and-white cows were munching on the far side of the sunk hedge. But England was disappointing, she thought; it was small, pretty; and August was the dulllest month of the year, with the trees all muffled in heavy green leaves. Then she went down for she wanted if possible to see Morris alone.

But when she went into the drawing-room he was not alone. She had to give him her quick kiss—but he pressed her hand—in front of a stoutish, white-haired old man in a dinner-jacket.

"You know each other, don't you?" said Morris.

"Eleanor—Sir William Whatney." He put a little stress upon the "Sir" which for a moment confused Eleanor.

"We used to know each other," said Sir William, coming forward and smiling as he took her hand.

She looked at him. Could it be William Whatney—old Dubbin—who used to come to Abercorn Terrace years ago? It was. She had not seen him since he went to India.

But are we all like that? she asked herself, looking from the grisled, crumpled red-and-yellow face of the boy she had known—he was almost hairless—at her own brother Morris. He looked bald and thin; but surely he was in the prime of life, as she was herself? Or had they all suddenly become old fogies like Sir William? Then her nephew North and her niece Peggy came in with their mother and they all went in to dinner. Old Mrs Chinnery dined upstairs.

How has Dubbin become Sir William Whatney? she wondered, glancing at him as they ate the fish that had been brought up in the damp parcel. She had last seen him—it must have been thirty years ago—in a boat on the river. They had gone for a picnic; they had supped on an island in the middle of the river, and he had said—the words came back to her—"Your sister has the brightest eyes I ever saw." Morris had told her going home, and she had hidden her face with the newspaper in order to conceal her pleasure. And then he had gone to India. It was he who had praised her eyes.

But they were talking about the fête. Craster had won the pig; Mrs Grice had won the silver-plated salver.

"To tell the truth I was very glad to be rid of it," said Celia. "The plate was all wearing off; and she was in raptures with it."

"That's what I saw on the perambulator," said Eleanor. "I met the fête coming back," she explained.

"We could have done with more drinks," said Peggy.

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"Yes, but we couldn't be sure it was going to be so hot," said Celia.

"My word," North exclaimed, "driving that pig!"

"Not so bad as pouring out lemonade," said Peggy.

Eleanor glanced at her nephew and niece. They sat opposite her with the sun on their faces. Their perfectly healthy egg-shell faces did not make her feel that she was old, but on the contrary, that they were extraordinarily young. Peggy's blue dress stuck out stiffly like a child's muslin frock; North was still a brown-eyed cricketing boy.

"Don't you envy my sister-in-law?" said Celia, turning to Sir William. "She's just back from a tour in Greece."

"Indeed!" said Sir William. "Which part of Greece?"

"We went to Athens, then to Olympia, then to Delphi," Eleanor began. They were on purely formal terms evidently—she and Dubbin.

"My brother-in-law, Edward," Celia explained, "takes these delightful tours."

"You remember Edward?" said Morris. "Weren't you up with him?"

"No, he was junior to me," said Sir William. "But I've heard of him, of course. He's—let me think—what is he—a great swell, isn't he?"

"Oh, he's at the top of his tree," said Morris.

He was not jealous of Edward, Eleanor thought; but there was a certain note in his voice which told her that he was comparing his career with Edward's.

"They all loved him," she said, "on the tour—all the old ladies." She smiled, thinking of Edward lecturing to troops of devout school mistresses on the Acropolis. They used to take out their notebooks and scribble down every word. But he had been generosity itself to her; paid her fare, looked after her all the time.

"I was in Greece five years ago," said Sir William, "with an old chum of mine. You remember Eversley—W. W.?" he said, turning to Morris.

"W. W.? What's he doing there?" Morris asked.

Sir William explained what W. W. was doing at Athens. Eleanor began to think how one day on the Acropolis, when Edward was lecturing—but she was recalled.

"Did you come across anyone at the Embassy?" Sir William asked her. Then he corrected himself. "Not an Embassy though, is it?"

"No. Athens is not an Embassy," said Morris. Here there was a diversion as to the difference between an Embassy and a Ministry. Then they began to discuss the situation in the Balkans. Eleanor ought to have been able to throw light on it; she ought to have presented her letter of introduction. But then she would have been asked to dinner, and she had not brought the right clothes for the Embassy, or, to speak more accurately, the Ministry; for such it was.

"There's going to be trouble there in the near future," Sir William was saying. He turned to Morris and they discussed the situation in the Balkans.

Eleanor's attention wandered. What's he done? she wondered. Certain words and gestures brought him back to her as he had been thirty years ago; there were relics of the old Dubbin, if one half-shut one's eyes, under his extremely accomplished manner. He had been the son of a little solicitor at Staines. But he had

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the manner of a man who had been engaged in important affairs. She listened. He seemed too big for the quiet, English dining-room; his voice boomed out. He wanted an audience. He had turned to Celia politely, for she looked a little vacant when they discussed politics, and brought the conversation back to her level. He was saying, what struck him coming back from the East was "that all you people live in the dark."

He had been staying with his sister in Kensington. Eleanor recognised the type; the slight bitterness; the slight jocosity of the retired official. They had been great people out there, and then they retired and stayed with sisters in Kensington. It was a bad plan, she thought; Sir William was still in the prime of life. But he did not look healthy.

"We are trying to persuade Sir William to take a house in this neighbourhood," Celia explained to her. "Lady St. Austell was telling me she's almost certain The Grange is to let," she said, turning to Sir William. But would he be content to live at the Grange? Eleanor thought—this large heavy man with his authoritative manner?

He was telling a story. He spoke in clipped, nervous sentences as if there were a ring round them—a style she admired, but she had missed the beginning. It was about his own youth apparently. It was addressed to North, who had fixed him with his admiring, candid eyes. Sir William was quoting what somebody had said: "... Here's a chance for you, young fellow. Go home and think it over."

"But I didn't," said Sir William. "I turned round and said, 'I'm your man.'" He chuckled, approving the youthful Sir William.

"Give Sir William some more wine," Celia whispered to the nervous parlourmaid. There was some juggling with decanters on the sideboard. Celia frowned nervously. A girl from the village who doesn't know her job, Eleanor reflected. The story was reaching its climax; but she had missed several links.

"... and I found myself in an old pair of riding-breeches standing under a peacock umbrella; and all the good people were crouching with their heads to the ground. 'Good Lord,' I said to myself, 'if they only knew what a bally ass I feel!'" He held out his glass to be filled. "That's how we were taught our job in those days," he added.

Celia watched him nervously as he sipped his wine again. Probably the girl had brought up the wrong vintage, Eleanor thought. Sir William went on talking. There was something vaguely distasteful to her about him. He was boasting, of course; that was natural. He came back to England after ruling a district "about the size of Ireland," as they always said; and nobody had ever heard of him. She had a feeling that she would hear a great many more stories that sailed serenely to his own advantage, during the week-end. She listened. He talked very well. He had done a great many interesting things. But she wished that Morris would tell stories too. She wished that he would assert himself instead of leaning back and passing his hand—the hand with the cut on it—over his forehead.

Ought I to have urged him to go to the Bar? she thought. Her father had been against it. But once it's done there it is; he married; the children came; he had to go on, whether he wanted to or not. How irrevocable things are, she thought. We make our experiments,

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then they make theirs. She looked at her nephew North and her niece Peggy. North was listening intently; Peggy was looking down at her plate. She had the non-committal look which well brought up children have when they listen to the talk of their elders. She might be amused; or bored, was it? Eleanor could not be sure which it was.

"There he goes," Peggy said, suddenly looking up. "The owl," she said, catching Eleanor's eye. Eleanor turned to look out of the window behind her. She missed the owl; she saw the heavy trees, gold in the setting sun; and the cows slowly moving as they munched their way across the meadow.

"You can time him," said Peggy, "he's so regular." Then Celia made a move.

"Shall we leave the gentlemen to their politics," she said, "and have our coffee on the terrace?"

"We'll come in a minute," said Morris.

As she left the room, Eleanor felt that the men were glad to be free to talk about politics uninterrupted. She felt for a moment shut out; rather as she did in one of the Greek churches when the guide refused to let her step on some sacred spot; or at Pompeii when a picture had been too indecent for ladies to look at. It did not make her angry, as it made Rose; it amused her rather. After all, she thought, as they went out, she did not want to step on a sacred spot or to look at an indecent picture. But she wanted to see the owl before it was too dark. She went upstairs to fetch her field glasses.

An old maid who washes and watches birds, she said to herself, looking at her eyes in the glass. That's my label, she thought as she went downstairs. That's what they think I am. But I'm not, she thought, as she walked through the drawing-room out onto the terrace where they were having coffee.

It was still very warm; it was still light enough to see the hills in the distance.

"He'll be back in a minute," said Peggy. "He'll come along that hedge."

She pointed to the dark line of hedge that went across the meadow. Eleanor focused her glasses and waited.

"Now," said Celia, pouring out the coffee. "There are so many things I want to ask you." She paused. She always had a hoard of questions to ask; she had not seen Eleanor since April. In four months questions accumulated. Now they came out drop by drop.

"In the first place," she began. "No." She rejected that question in favour of another.

"What's all this about Rose?" she asked.

"What?" said Eleanor absentmindedly, altering the focus of her glasses. "I'm afraid it's getting too dark," she said; the field was blurred.

"Morris says she's been had up in a police-court," said Celia. She dropped her voice slightly though they were alone.

"She threw a brick—" said Eleanor. She focused her glasses on the hedge again. She held them poised in case the owl should come that way again.

"Will she be put in prison?" Peggy asked quickly.

"Not this time," said Eleanor. "Next time—Ah, here he comes!" she broke off. The blunt-headed bird came swinging along the hedge. He looked almost white in the dusk. Eleanor got him within the circle of her lens. He held a little black spot in front of him.

"He's got a mouse in his claws!" she exclaimed.

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"He's got a nest in the steeple," said Peggy. The owl swooped out of the field of vision.

"I do think it's so silly," said Celia irritably. "It only annoys men; it makes them think us hysterical."

"But Mummy," Peggy protested, "after all—"

"I've got him again!" Eleanor exclaimed. She had raised her glasses. "He's gone to the top of the steeple." The little church steeple that was in need of repairs was visible at the end of the garden.

"Now I can't see him any more," she said. She lowered her glasses. They were silent for a moment, sipping their coffee. Celia was thinking of her next question; Eleanor anticipated her.

"Tell me about William Whatney," she said. "When I last saw him he was a slim young man in a boat." Peggy burst out laughing.

"That must have been ages ago!" she said.

"Not so very long," said Eleanor. She felt rather nettled. "Well—" she reflected, "twenty years—twenty-five years perhaps."

It seemed a very short time to her; but then, she thought, it was before Peggy was born. She could only be sixteen or seventeen.

"Isn't he a delightful man?" Celia exclaimed. "I like him so much. He was in India, you know—what d'you call it? I forget. Now he's retired, and we do hope he'll take a house here; but Morris thinks he'd find it too dull. . . . I hope they won't sit much longer," she added, "or the coffee'll be cold."

They sat silent for a moment, looking out over the meadow. The cows coughed now and then as they munched and moved a step further. A sweet scent of cows and grass was wafted up to them.

"It's going to be another hot day tomorrow," said Peggy. The sky was perfectly smooth; it seemed made of innumerable grey-blue atoms the colour of an Italian officer's cloak; until it reached the horizon where there was a long bar of pure green. Everything looked very settled; very still; very pure. There was not a single cloud, and the stars were not yet showing. Eleanor thought of the vast open spaces of Spain; of the immense ranges of high mountains. Yes—but now that the sun had sunk, the trees had lost their heavy look; the downs in the distance became larger and simpler; the wood on the slope bristled like a horse's mane.

"How lovely it is!" she exclaimed, as if she were making amends. She was beginning to lose her feeling that England was so small, so smug, so domestic.

"If only Mr Robinson doesn't build!" Celia sighed—they were the local scourge, Eleanor remembered; rich people who threatened to build. "I did my best to be polite to them at the bazaar today," she went on. "Some people won't ask them; but I say one must be polite to neighbours in the country; and they do a lot of good." The sense of England was rapidly returning to Eleanor; so she was about to ask once again, who had stayed here, when Peggy interrupted:

"They give ripping parties, anyhow," she said.

"Ripping?" her mother complained, half laughing. "'Ripping'? I wish you wouldn't pick up all North's slang, my dear. . . . But there are so many things I want to ask you before the gentlemen come," she added. Again the bottle was tilted on its end. Eleanor waited obediently.

"Have you had an offer for Abercorn Terrace yet?"

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Celia demanded. Drop, drop, drop, out her questions came.

"Not yet," said Eleanor. "The agent wants me to cut it up into flats."

"Yes. That might be a good plan." Celia reflected for a moment. Then she hopped on again.

"And now about Maggie—when's her baby going to be born?"

"In November, I think," said Eleanor. "In Paris," she added.

"I hope it'll be all right," said Celia. "But I do wish it could have been born in England." She reflected again. "Her children will be French, I suppose?" she said.

"Yes; French, I suppose," said Eleanor. She was looking at the green bar; it was fading; it was turning blue.

"Everybody says he's a very nice fellow," said Celia. "But René—René," her accent was bad, "—it doesn't sound like a man's name."

"You can call him Renny," said Peggy, pronouncing it in the English way.

"But that reminds me of Ronny; and I don't like Ronny. We had a stable-boy called Ronny."

"Who stole the hay," said Peggy. They were silent again. "It's such a pity—" Celia began. Then she stopped. The maid had come out to ask if she should take coffee into the dining-room.

"Perhaps it would be as well," said Celia.

The maid began clearing the coffee away; she was clumsy; she took her time.

"It's a wonderful night, isn't it?" said Celia, adapting her voice to the presence of servants. "It looks as if it would never rain again. In which case I don't know what we're going to do about water. . . . Oh, but there's quite enough for everybody at present!" she added, with the little twitter that recognised the family joke about three baths daily.

Eleanor, looking at the fading hills, had ceased to listen; but she held the last sentence suspended without a meaning in her mind's ear: "—quite enough for everybody at present." After all the foreign languages she had been hearing, it sounded to her pure English. A lovely language, she thought, saying over to herself the commonplace words to which Celia gave some indescribable country accent, for the Chinnerys had always lived in Dorsetshire.

The maid had gone.

"What were we saying?" Celia resumed. "I was saying, it's such a pity. Yes. . . ."

Eleanor listened not to the words but to the way she stressed them. Her face had become invisible: her words issued from darkness: ". . . such a pity. Their father and mother dying when they did; their brothers being so much older and always abroad; and so they went to live in that dreadful slum. I shall never forget, I can't tell you, what an expedition it was—" They heard male voices approaching; she quickened her pace.

"We drove and we drove and we drove; and I said to James, I don't think this can be the street—there was a public-house at the corner—oh, here you are!" She broke off. The gentlemen were upon them.

The scent of cigar smoke floated out into the air. The chairs were pulled up and rearranged. They sat in a semicircle looking across the meadows at the fading

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hills. The broad bar of green that lay across the horizon had vanished. Only a tinge was left in the sky. It had become peaceful and cool; in them too seemed to be smoothed out. There was no need to talk. The owl flew down the meadow again; they could just see the white of his wing against the dark of the hedge.

"There he goes," said North, puffing at a cigar which was his first, Eleanor guessed, Sir William's gift. The elm trees had become dead black against the sky. Their leaves hung in a fretted pattern like black lace with holes in it. Through a hole Eleanor saw the point of a star. She looked up. There was another.

"It's going to be a fine day tomorrow," said Morris, knocking out his pipe against his shoe. Far away on a distant road there was a rattle of cart-wheels; then a chorus of voices singing—country people going home. This is England, Eleanor thought to herself, as if she were slowly sinking into some fine mesh made of branches shaking, hills growing dark, and leaves hanging like black lace with stars among them. But a bat swooped low over their heads.

"How I hate bats!" Celia exclaimed, raising her hand to her head nervously.

"Do you?" said Sir William. "I rather like them." His voice was quiet and almost melancholy. Now Celia will say, They get into one's hair, Eleanor thought.

"They get into one's hair," she said. Eleanor smiled.

"But I haven't any hair," said Sir William. His bald head, his large face gleamed out in the darkness.

"I suppose you wouldn't get an evening like this in India?" said Celia. Eleanor felt her appealing to Morris to say something; but Morris was sunk in one of the silences that were so profound.

"No, not like this," said Sir William. The bat swooped again, skimming the ground at their feet. A little cool air stirred at their ankles. The trees were scarcely distinguishable; the hills had become part of the sky. There was a twinkling light in some distant farm home which Eleanor had thought was still the sky. Then somebody opened the window behind them.

"That's Ellen," said Celia. "Yes, I'll come in," she said, rising. "It's mamma," she explained, "Nobody need move."

She got up and went into the house. They sat on for a few minutes; but it was getting chilly and they went in.

After the dark the drawing-room with its lamps had the effect of a stage. Old Mrs Chinnery sitting in her wheeled chair with her ear-trumpet seemed to have made a formal entry; and to sit there waiting homage. She was arrayed in her old lady's dress of black satin; she had a lace cap on her head; her hawk-like nose was curved in her shrivelled cheeks; a little rim of red showed on one of her drooping eyelids. But she looked exactly the same, not a day older; as vigorous as ever. Eleanor bent to give her the customary kiss; life once more took its familiar proportions. So she had bent, night after night, over her father. She was glad to stoop down; it made her feel younger herself. She knew the whole procedure by heart. They, the middle-aged, deferred to the very old; the very old were courteous to them; and then came the usual pause. They had nothing to say to her; she had nothing to say to them. What happened next? Eleanor saw the old

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lady's eyes suddenly brighten. What made the eyes of an old woman of ninety turn blue? Cards? Yes. Celia had fetched the green baize table and Mrs Chinnery had a passion for whist. But she too had her ceremony; she too had her manners.

"Not tonight," she said, making a little gesture as if to push away the table. "I am sure it will bore Sir William?" She gave a nod in the direction of the large man who stood there seeming a little outside the family party.

"Not at all. Not at all," he said with alacrity. "Nothing would please me more," he assured her.

You're a good fellow, Dubbin, Eleanor thought. And they drew up the chairs; and dealt the cards; and Morris chaffed his mother-in-law and called her "Madam" down her ear-trumpet.

They played rubber after rubber; North read a book; Peggy strummed on the piano; and Celia, dozing over her embroidery, now and then gave a sudden start and put her hand over her mouth. At last the door opened stealthily. Ellen, the discreet black maid with a white shawl over her arm, stood behind Mrs Chinnery's chair, waiting. Mrs Chinnery pretended to ignore her, but the others were glad to stop. Ellen stepped forward and Mrs Chinnery, submitting, was wheeled off to the mysterious upper chamber of extreme old age. Her pleasure was over.

After that they were too sleepy to talk. The story of George the Third was told again; Celia capped it with a story about Jane Austen's novel.

"But that's never been proved," said Morris, taking her up rather shortly. Then Celia rolled up her sewing and yawned.

"The bazaar's made me so sleepy. I must go to bed."

North jumped up with alacrity to open the door. Celia lit the brass candlesticks in the hall outside. She began to climb the stairs and Eleanor followed after her. But Peggy lagged behind. Eleanor heard her whispering with North in the hall.

"Come along, Peggy," Celia called back over the banister as she toiled upstairs. When she got to the landing at the top she stopped and called back again rather sharply:

"Come, Peggy." There was a pause. Then Peggy came, reluctantly. She kissed her mother obediently. They did not hit it off, Eleanor guessed; if she had not been there they would have argued about something. Peggy looked very pretty in her blue dress in the candlelight; under the picture of the little Chinnery's in trousers; but not in the least sleepy; she did not mean to go to bed, Eleanor felt sure.

She went into her room and undressed. All the windows were open and she heard the trees rustling in the garden. It was so hot still that she lay in her nightgown on top of the bed with only the sheet over her. The candle burnt its little pear-shaped flame on the table by her side. She lay listening vaguely to the trees in the garden; and watched the shadow of a moth that dashed round and round the room. That's so English, she thought; moths flying round a candle in one's bedroom. And then one has either to get up and shut the window or blow out the candle, she thought drowsily. She did not want to do either. She wanted to lie still. It was a relief to lie in the semi-darkness after the talk,

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after the cards. She could still see the cards falling; black, red and yellow; kings, queens and knaves; on a green baize table. She looked drowsily round her. A nice vase of flowers stood on the dressing-table; there was the polished wardrobe and a china box by her bedside. She lifted the lid. Yes; four biscuits and a pale piece of chocolate—in case she should be hungry in the night, she smiled. Celia remembered everything. She had also provided her with a row of dejected-looking week-end books: one of Jane Austen's novels; *The Diary of a Nobody*; and an odd volume of Dante. She opened *The Diary of a Nobody*. Then she thought she heard a sound in the garden. Was it only the whispering of the trees? Or was there some plot? She felt convinced that Peggy meant to disobey her mother; she was sure there was some scheme on foot. She listened; but she could only hear the heavy-laden branches creaking up and down in the garden; and the mooing of the cows. She laid the book on the bed beside her. Perhaps because she had been travelling, it seemed as if the ship were still padding softly through the sea; as if the train were still swinging from side to side as it rattled across France. She felt as if things were moving past her as she lay stretched on the bed under the single sheet. But it's not the landscape any longer, she thought; it's people's lives, their changing lives.

The door of the pink bedroom shut. William Whatney coughed next door. She heard him cross the room. Now he was standing by the window, smoking a last cigar. What's he thinking, she wondered—about India?—how he stood under a peacock umbrella? Then he began moving about the room, undressing. She could hear him take up a brush and put it down again on his dressing-table. And it's to him, she thought, remembering the wide sweep of his chin and the floating stains of pink and yellow that lay underneath it, that I owe that moment, which had been more than pleasure, when she hid her face behind the newspaper in the corner of the third-class railway carriage.

Now there were three moths dashing round the ceiling. They made a little tapping noise as they dashed round and round from corner to corner. If she left the window open much longer the room would be full of moths. A daddy-long-legs was crawling over the candle; he would get his legs stuck in the grease. But she could not bring herself to get up and shut the window. The blind blew out; she could hear far away country sounds; a cow lowing; a bird chirping; and now, to her delight, she heard the liquid call of an owl going from tree to tree.

Perhaps she's going off with North, she thought, through the fields to bathe. She thought of the moonlit waves breaking on one of those little beaches that are made of crushed sea-shells, so fine, so soft that the foot sinks into them. It's all very English, she thought, taking up *The Diary of a Nobody* and glancing through it.

But she knew it almost by heart. She wanted something different. Jane Austen? No. Dante? But she could not read Dante's Italian. She lay looking at the ceiling. A faint water-mark appeared. It was like a hill. You feel nobody's ever been there before, she thought, seeing on the ceiling the outline of one of the great desolate hills; in Italy was it, or Greece? She had stood alone among twisted olive trees and looked at a hill.

Now she opened the old volume of Dante. Her

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Italian was rusty; she could make no sense of the hard little archaic words. She read a few lines aloud under her breath. She thought of Celia talking English in the garden. This is harder; this is sharper, she thought, and then there's suddenly the beautiful long word. But the meaning escaped her. She began skipping from the text to the translation:

chè per quanti si dice più li nostro
[for by so many more there are who say "ours"],

tanto possiede più di ben ciascuno
[so much the more of good doth each possess.] . . .

She stopped. Brushed lightly by her mind that was watching the moths on the ceiling, that was listening to the call of the owl as it went from tree to tree, the words did not give out their full meaning, but seemed to hold something furled up in the hard crinkled shell of the archaic Italian:

chè per quanti si dice più li nostro
tanto possiede più di ben ciascuno.

I'll read it one of these days, she thought, shutting the book, when I've pensioned Crosby off. Poor old Crosby, she murmured. What's to happen to her? But it can't go on for ever, she thought—Abercorn Terrace. Things change; things pass. They can't go on for ever, she repeated to herself. Again the sense came to her of a ship padding softly through the sea; of a train swinging from side to side along a railway line. Things pass, things pass, she murmured to herself, looking up at the ceiling with the water-stain on it. And where are we going? Where—A blank came in her thoughts. I shall say to Crosby. Look here, Crosby. . . . Another space came in her mind. The moths were dashing round the ceiling. The books slipped onto the floor. Who was it won the pig? she asked herself. Craster won the silver plate, but who was it won the— She made an effort; turned round and blew out the candle.

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VII

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Snow was falling. It fell fast and profusely, making the whole air thick, and casting a hard white glare upon the walls of the bathroom in which Eleanor stood with the young man from the house agent's. She glanced out. The little trees in the front garden were heavily lined with snow; all the roofs were softly moulded with snow; but down in the road long yellow ruts had been driven by the carts, for it thawed as it fell. The light was unbecoming to the empty house and to the complexion of the young man who had been sent by Messrs Filby and Edge to give advice.

He took a gloomy view of the situation.

"The fact is, Miss Pargiter," he said as they went downstairs again, "our clients expect more lavatory accommodation nowadays."

His gloom, though no doubt it was partly assumed, irritated Eleanor. He seemed to indict their cleanliness, their humanity, as he went up and down sniffing and prying. There was only one bath, and there was a basement. And instead of using the hard little words that her friend Duffus used to use when he took his footrule out of his pocket and sized up cupboards and sinks, he drawled out this faded bloodless nonsense about "lavatory accommodation." Why not say "baths" and have done with it? She stood on the staircase and looked down his collar. He had probably washed his own neck in a sink at Wandsworth—not very efficiently, she thought; looking at the red ears that stood out over his high collar. The light was unbecoming to them both; the glare of the falling snow. Yet it was beautiful, falling. She could see it falling as she stood there, through the panels of the hall door. He took his bowler hat from the hall table and opened the door. The snow lay thick and gleaming over the front garden; over the steps that led down to the street. He scraped and bowed and stepped cautiously in his business man's buttoned boots on to the thick white cushion that lay on the front-door steps; leaving yellow footprints. There was a four-wheeler at the door.

Eleanor turned; now she must say good-bye to Crosby. There she was, dodging about in her best bonnet and mantle. She had been following Eleanor about the house like a dog all the morning; and the odious moment could no longer be put off. Her four-wheeler was at the door; they had to say good-bye.

"Well, Crosby, it all looks very empty, doesn't it?" said Eleanor, looking in at the empty drawing-room. The white light of the snow glared in on the walls. It showed up the marks on the walls where the furniture had stood, where the pictures had hung.

"It does, Miss Eleanor," said Crosby. She stood looking too. Eleanor knew that she was going to cry. She did not want her to cry. For the moment, however, she could think of nothing to say.

"I can still see you all sitting round that table, Miss Eleanor," said Crosby. But the table had gone. Morris had taken this; Delia had taken that; everything had been shared out and separated.

"And the kettle that wouldn't boil," said Eleanor. "D'you remember that?" She tried to laugh.

"Oh, Miss Eleanor, I remember everything!" said Crosby, shaking her head. The tears were forming, Eleanor knew; she looked away into the further room.

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It was Crosby who minded leaving the house, she thought. As for herself—it was a relief to be rid of it all. But to Crosby, Abercorn Terrace was the entire world. She had known every cupboard, flagstone, chair and table in that large rambling house, not from five or six feet of distance as they had known it; but from her knees, as she scrubbed and polished; every groove, stain, fork, knife, napkin and cupboard. They and their doings had made her entire world. And now she was going off, to retire to a single room at Richmond.

"I should think you'd be glad to be out of that basement anyhow, Crosby," said Eleanor, turning back into the hall again. She had never realised how dark, how low it was, until, looking at it with "our Mr Grice," she had suddenly felt ashamed.

"It was my home for forty years, Miss," said Crosby. The tears were running. For forty years! Eleanor thought with a start. She had been a little girl of thirteen or fourteen when Crosby came to them, looking so stiff and smart. Now her blue gnat's eyes protruded and her cheeks were sunk.

Crosby was stooping to put Rover on the chain.

"You're sure you want him?" said Eleanor, looking at the rather smelly, wheezy and unattractive old dog. "We could easily find a nice home for him in the country."

"Oh, miss, don't ask me to give him up," said Crosby. Tears checked her speech. Tears were running freely down her cheeks. For all Eleanor could do to prevent it, tears formed in her eyes too.

"Dear Crosby, good-bye," she said. She bent in her arms and kissed her. She had a curious dry quality of skin. Then Crosby, holding Rover on the chain, turned and began to edge sideways down the slippery steps. Eleanor stood holding the door open. It was a dreadful scene, muddled, unhappy, wrong. She herself felt nothing but relief at going; and yet they had all lived there; there was the little garden where they used to plant crocuses. And now Crosby, with flakes of snow on her black bonnet, was climbing into the four-wheeler with Rover in her arms.

By the time she had reached Richmond the snow had stopped falling and the streets were running with a yellowish clotted mixture, so that Crosby, getting out at the door of the little house near the Green, had to carry Rover in her arms lest he should get his feet wet and make marks on the floor. Mrs Burt was standing at the door; and Mr Bishop, the lodger on the top floor, lent a hand with the luggage.

Ever since the Colonel had had his first stroke Crosby had been planning her retirement. She had arranged with her friend, Mrs Burt, to take a room in her house at Richmond. Mrs Burt had been the cook, Louisa; she had married Burt, the greengrocer; they had invested their savings in a small house off Richmond Green. For some years now Crosby had been hoarding up odds and ends with a view to her retirement. Her room was small, at the top of the house, overlooking the garden. But when she had unpacked her box and arranged her furniture it was comfortable enough and full of things that reminded her of Aber-

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corn Terrace. There were various knick-knacks that nobody wanted; things that had been thrown away or given her; Indian elephants, silver vases, and the walrus from the writing-table, which Crosby had found in the waste-paper basket one morning. There they all were, ranged askew on the mantelpiece, together with photographs of the family, some in wedding dresses, others in wigs and gowns, and Mr Martin in his uniform in the middle of the wall, because he was her favourite.

But Rover was the chief relic, the representative almost of Abercorn Terrace. Crosby transferred to him many of the feelings that she had felt for the Colonel in his later years; but she had a peculiar tenderness for Rover, for he was her dog now and depended upon her as the Colonel had not done. Mr Bishop, a retired butler who had the top room, pleased her by remarking that you could tell he was a well-bred dog from the shape of his head, and Mr Bishop was a man who had had a good deal to do with dogs in the earlier part of his career.

Crosby soon had to ask him for advice. Whether it was that Richmond was too low after Abercorn Terrace, or whether he felt the change, Rover was attacked by eczema soon after the move. It was very persistent. No sooner had one spot behind the ears been cured than another broke out under his front legs. Mr Bishop advised her on his diet. She tried this and that, but still the bare patches persisted. Then she bought ointment and rubbed it in night and morning. Still the bare patches persisted. What was worse, she could get him to take no interest in life. He would roll over with his paws in the air when she tried to take him shopping with her of a morning as if he begged to be left alone. Boils appeared between his toes; and his breath smelt nasty. At last one spring morning Mr Bishop had to tell Mrs Crosby—for she wore the courtesy title in Richmond—that in his opinion the poor old chap (here he patted his head) was better off of the way.

"Come along with me, my dear," said Mrs Burt, putting her arm on Crosby's shoulder, "and let Bishop do it."

"He won't suffer, I can assure you," said Mr Bishop, rising from his knees. He had put her Ladyship's dogs to sleep scores of times before this. "He'll just take one sniff"—Mr Bishop had his pocket-handkerchief in his hand—"and he'll be off in a jiffy."

"It'll be for his good, Annie," Mrs Burt added, trying to draw her away.

Indeed, the poor old dog looked very miserable. But Crosby shook her head. It had wagged his tail; his eyes were open. There was a gleam of what she had long considered a smile on his face. He depended on her, she felt. She was not going to hand him over to strangers. So she thanked Mr Bishop; but shook her head. She banked up the rug in which he lay by the fire. She fed him with a teaspoon on Brand's Essence for three days and nights; but at last he refused to open his lips; his body grew stiffer and stiffer; and a fly walked across his nose without its twitching. This was in the early morning with the sparrows twittering on the trees outside.

"It's a mercy she's got something to distract her,"

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said Mrs Burt next day as Crosby passed the window in her best mantle and bonnet. It was Thursday, and every Thursday she went to town to fetch Mr Martin's socks from Ebury Street.

"But he ought to have been put down long ago," said Mrs Burt, turning away from the window. They had buried him in the back garden the night before. She looked very sad as she passed the window. Her eyes were still red.

Crosby took the district railway to Sloane Square and then she walked. She walked slowly, holding herself stiffly with her elbows jutting out from her sides as if, being so small and old, she had to protect herself from the haphazardry of the street. She still looked very sad; but the change from Richmond to London did her good. She glanced at the shops approvingly as she passed. She felt more herself in Ebury Street than in Richmond, though Sloane Square was by no means the same as Abercorn Terrace. Still here were the kind of shops she had been used to; the ladies and gentlemen had the same kind of way with them. There was none of that perky, underbred provinciality that she felt in the High Street. A common sort of people lived at Richmond, she always thought. She remembered as she turned into Ebury Street that General Arbuthnot, who used to visit the master, lived here. But he was dead now. Mrs Burt had shown her the notice in the newspaper. She reached Mr Martin's lodgings and rang the bell. She drew herself up as she waited for Mrs Brigg to open the door. At first Mrs Brigg had been inclined to be standoffish. But now the stiffness had been replaced by a mutual respect. She was a very nice person, Crosby had to admit; the widow of a butler. They had exchanged references. Each had boasted. Crosby, though scrupling to increase the number of servants actually kept by Colonel Pargiter—tempted though she was to endow Mr Fogg, the odd man, with the standing of butler—had brought her to understand that her gentleman, the Captain, was connected with the Peerage; and accustomed all his life to the best of everything. Today, to her great pleasure, Mrs Brigg, after greeting her and condoling on the death of Rover, told her that the Captain was in his sitting-room and would like a word with her before she went.

He was sitting reading his paper just as the Master used to sit, Crosby thought, at eleven o'clock in the morning. His beautiful red hair was getting a little grey, Crosby noticed; but it was still very thick. He put down his paper as she came in, and said as usual—she always liked his manner: "Well, Crosby, how's the world treating you?"

She remembered Rover; and the tears started to her eyes.

Martin listened to the story very sympathetically. Then he got up, went into his bedroom, and came back holding a pyjama jacket in his hand.

"What d'you call that, Crosby?" he said. He pointed to a hole under the collar, fringed with brown. Crosby adjusted her gold-rimmed spectacles.

"A burn, sir," she said with conviction.

"You never saw a hole like that made by ordinary

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wear and tear, did you, Crosby?" he demanded.

"Never in my life, sir," she said emphatically.

"Brand new pyjamas; only worn them twice," said Martin, holding them extended. Crosby touched them. They were made of the finest silk, she could tell.

"Tut—tut—tut!" she said, shaking her head.

"Will you please take this pyjama to Mrs What's-her-name," he went on, holding it out in front of him, "and tell her, with my compliments, that the sooner she finds a washerwoman who doesn't stick my best pyjamas on the top of the kitchen fire——"

"Oh, sir!" Crosby protested.

His exaggeration puzzled her, he saw. One had to be very literal and use only the simplest language, he remembered, when one talked to Crosby.

"Tell her to get another laundress," he concluded, "and send the old one to the devil."

Crosby gathered the injured pyjama tenderly to her breast; Mr Martin never could abide wool next the skin, she remembered. Martin paused. One must pass the time of the day with Crosby, but the death of Rover had seriously limited their topics of conversation. He did not like to suggest the gift of another dog.

"How's the rheumatics?" he asked, as she stood very upright with the pyjamas on her arm. She had grown distinctly smaller, he thought. She shook her head. Richmond was very low compared to Abercorn Terrace, she said. Her face dropped. She was thinking of the death of Rover, he supposed. He must get her mind off that. He could not bear tears.

"Seen Miss Eleanor's new flat," he asked. Crosby had. But she did not like flats. Miss Eleanor only had a woman in to do for her. In her opinion Miss Eleanor wore herself out.

"And the people's not worth it, sir," she said, referring to the Zwinglers, Paravicinis and Cobbs who used to come to the back door for cast-off clothing in the old days.

Martin shook his head. He could not think what to say next.

"And are you keeping pretty well yourself, Master Martin?" she asked of him. Every now and then she used the diminutive as if it were a perquisite of her long service.

"Not married yet, Crosby," said Martin.

Crosby cast her eye round the room. It was a bachelor's apartment, with its leather chairs; its chessmen on top of a pile of books and its soda-water syphon on a tray. She ventured to say that she was sure that there were plenty of nice young ladies who would be very glad to take care of him.

"Ah, but I like lying in bed of a morning," said Martin. He got up.

"You always did, sir," she said, smiling. And then it was possible for Martin to take out his watch and exclaim,

"By Jove, Crosby, I must be off!" and the door shut upon Crosby.

He was relieved when she had gone; he hated talking to servants; it always made him feel insincere. He had an appointment, it was true, with his stockbroker; but there was plenty of time. He would walk.

It was a fine May morning; a gay and sparkling morning, the beginning of the London season, and

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everybody was going about their business. But Crosby had brought back the feeling of Abercorn Terrace. The house was still on their hands, he remembered as he walked down the street. And no wonder; who could want a house like that? It had one bathroom; and a basement. And there all those different people had lived boxed up together, he thought. An abominable system, he thought, uncivilised, insanitary. A good many things had gone on behind the scenes. Who was the lady who signed herself "Mira" in an illiterate hand on the bundle of old letters that they had found in his father's drawer when they were clearing up? The poor old boy had had to conceal that adventure, he thought. It was a miracle that he had never been found out himself, he reflected. Not that he had done anything very dreadful; but there would have been the devil to pay if the Colonel had found out about that room off the Fulham Road where he and Dodge and Everett used to smoke cheap cigars and tell smutty stories. No, he had no feeling of affection for Abercorn Terrace, he thought as he walked towards Hyde Park Corner.

The scene was extremely animated. Motor cars and motor omnibuses were streaming down the hill. The trees in the park had little green leaves on them. Cars with gay ladies in pale dresses were already passing in at the gates, and someone, he observed with interest, had written the words "God is Love" in pink chalk on the gatepost of Apsley House. It was an abominable system, he thought again. How can a boy of fifteen know what he wants to be? So they shove you into the army, he thought, walking down Piccadilly. There's the polo and the pig-sticking, and by the time you've seen through the humbug it's too late in the day. . . . That was his father's club, he thought, looking up at the plate-glass window where retired naval and military men were already turning over the newspapers and surveying the scene. He had come off better than some people, he thought; he had only wasted fifteen of the best years of his life. At the age of—what was he? But he disliked thinking of his age, which had broached the forties; and as a bus came up, he jumped on top.

When he came out of the stockbroker's office half an hour later he was flourishing his stick. He was better off than he expected; with luck he would have enough to live on. He took after his father; he liked juggling with stocks and shares. Once the old boy must have been very rich; then he lost it; then he made it . . . then . . . And now he thought . . . He stopped to look at a blue pot in the window of one of the Oriental warehouses; a blue pot on a Chinese stand with green brocade behind it. So now . . . he repeated. The sloping symmetrical body, the depth of blue, the little cracks in the glaze pleased him. He stood still for a moment. Then a shadow fell; a thought. Love ought to cease on both sides, he said, simultaneously. He walked on. But one side, he reflected, always wants to keep the other tied. Now she'll say to herself—he was thinking of a woman who had lost her glamour—he's rich; he can afford to marry. But I don't want to be tied, he said. He looked up. The light had opened in front of him. He had come out into the open space in front of St. Paul's. His mind had been closed on the blue pot; on the thought of his mistress. Now it opened. The sudden apparition of the great building standing there

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in the empty semicircle surprised him.

He crossed over and stood with his back against a shop window looking up at the great dome. All the weights in his body seemed to shift. He had a curious sense of something moving in his body in harmony with the building; it righted itself: it came to a full stop. It was exciting—this change of proportion. He wished he had been an architect. He stood with his back pressed against the shop trying to get the whole of the cathedral clear. But it was difficult with so many people about. They knocked against him and passed in front of him. It was the rush hour, of course, when City men were making off for their luncheons. They were taking short cuts across the steps. The pigeons were swirling up and then settling down again. Omnibuses were stopping and going on again. He thought he would have a look inside. The doors were opening and shutting as he mounted the steps. An old lady stood there feeding the pigeons out of a paper bag. He had no sentiment about the pigeons. They were a nuisance, he thought, making a mess on the steps. He climbed up slowly.

"And who's that?" he thought, looking at someone who was standing against one of the pillars. "Don't I know her?"

She was talking to herself.

"It's Sally!" he thought. He hesitated; should he speak to her, or should he not? He was fastidious; and the cloak she wore was not in the fashion. But she was company; he was tired of his own.

"A penny for your thoughts, Sally!" he said, tapping her on the shoulder.

She turned; her expression changed instantly. "I was thinking of you, Martin!" she exclaimed.

"What a lie!" he said, shaking hands.

"When I think of people, I always see them," she said. She gave her queer little shuffle—like a bird. It was a good cloak in its day, he thought, but not in the fashion. They stood for a moment on the steps, looking down at the crowded street beneath. A gust of organ music came out from the Cathedral behind them as the doors opened and shut. The faint ecclesiastical murmur was vaguely impressive, and the dark space of the Cathedral seen through the door.

"What were you thinking . . .?" he began. But he broke off. He was tired of himself. Other people change one, he thought, glancing at her. She was pale. "Come and lunch," he said. "I'll take you to a City chop-house."

They began to descend the steps. He looked back once over his shoulder, but it was impossible to look at the building; he had to shepherd her across the street. And then, when they had crossed the churchyard, he had to shepherd her along a narrow alley, entirely blocked by carts, turned outwards, into which great packages were being slid from the warehouses down long shoots from the upper storeys. They came at last to the City chop-house where he lunched when he was in that neighbourhood. He pushed through the swing doors.

"Where City gents have their lunch," he said, going in.

The restaurant was already crowded and gave off a warm, meaty smell. He looked in vain for an empty table; then a friendly waiter in dress clothes came forward and found them a table in the gangway.

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"Very full today, Alfred," said Martin affably, as the waiter took his coat and hat and hung them on the rack. He knew the waiter; he often lunched there; the waiter knew him too.

"Very full, Captain," he said.

"Now," he said, sitting down, "what shall we have?"

A vast brownish-yellow joint was being trundled from table to table on a lorry.

"That," said Sara, waving her hand at it.

"And drink?" said Martin. He took the wine-list and consulted it.

"Drink—" said Sara, "drink, I leave to you." She took off her gloves and laid them on a small reddish-brown book that was obviously a prayer-book.

"Drink you leave to me," said Martin. Prayer-books, he reflected, always had their leaves gilt with red and gold. Why? He chose the wine.

"And what were you doing," he said, dismissing the waiter, "at St. Paul's?"

"Listening to the service," she said. She looked round her. The room was very hot and rather small. It had gold leaves encrusted on a brown surface. People were passing them and coming in and out all the time. The waiter brought the wine. Martin poured her out a glass.

"And what were you doing," she asked, "at St. Paul's?" She smiled at him over the edge of her wine-glass.

"Wishing I'd been an architect," he said.

The saddle of mutton was wheeled up, and a man in a white jacket and cap cut thin long slices very dexterously.

"I didn't know you went to services," he said, looking at her prayer-book.

She did not answer. She kept looking round her, watching the people come in and go out. She sipped her wine. The colour was coming into her cheeks. She took up her knife and fork and began to eat the admirable mutton. They ate in silence for a moment.

"What did you think of it?" he asked. "St. Paul's?"

"There was a woman praying," she said, "and an old man with a white beard." She paused. "What do they think of it, Martin?" she asked.

"Much what Crosby thinks when she comes to see me," he said. He thought of the old woman standing at the door of his room with the pyjama jacket over her arm, and the devout look on her face.

"I'm Crosby's God," he said, helping her to brussels sprouts.

"Are you?" she said, smiling. "Crosby's God! Almighty, all-powerful Mr Martin!"

She raised her glass to him. Was she laughing? he wondered. He hoped she did not think him very old. "You remember Crosby, don't you?" he said. "She's retired, and her dog's dead."

"Her dog's dead, is it?" she said. She looked again over her shoulder. Conversation in a restaurant was impossible; it was all broken into little fragments. City men in their neat striped suits and bowler hats were brushing past them all the time.

"It's a fine church," she said, turning round. She had hopped back to St. Paul's, he supposed.

"Magnificent," he replied. "Were you looking at the monuments?"

Somebody had come in whom he recognised: Erridge, the stockbroker. He raised a finger and

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beckoned. Martin rose and went to speak to him. When he came back she had filled her glass again. He guessed from her expression what she was feeling. He envied her the warm generalised sensation of universal well-being that he used to get from half a glass of wine. It was good wine—it broke down barriers. He wanted to make her talk.

"And what, Sal," he said, touching the little book, "d'you make of it?"

She opened the prayer-book at random and began to read:

"The father incomprehensible; the son incomprehensible—" she began in her ordinary voice.

"Hush!" he stopped her. People were listening.

"And I looked at the monument to Nelson," she whispered.

"You can say that aloud," he assured her.

"And then the beadle walked down the aisle carrying a silver stick, and the clergyman read the lessons," she said in her ordinary voice. Martin took up the bill of fare.

"What shall we have now?" he asked. "Plum tart? Figs and cream? Rice pudding and custard?"

"Plum tart," she said. He beckoned to the waiter.

"And so you wanted to be an architect?" she said.

She slightly overdid the manner of a lady invited to lunch with a gentleman in a City chop-house, speaking in the presence of the waiter. He smiled.

"Yes," he said. "And they sent me into the Army instead, which I loathed."

"Hush!" she said. "Somebody's listening."

He looked round quickly; then he laughed. The waiter was setting their tart in front of them. They ate in silence.

"And what are you doing this afternoon?" he asked.

"The Round Pond at four," she said. She drummed on the table "The Round Pond at four." Now she had passed, he guessed, into the drowsy benevolence which waits on a good dinner and a glass of wine.

"Meeting somebody?" he asked.

"Yes, Maggie," she said.

They ate in silence. Fragments of other people's talk reached them in broken sentences. Then the man to whom Martin had spoken touched him on the shoulder as he went out.

"Wednesday at eight," he said.

"Right you are," said Martin. He made a note in his pocket-book.

"And what are you doing this afternoon?" she asked.

"Ought to see my sister in prison," he said, lighting a cigarette.

"In prison?" she asked.

"Rose. For throwing a brick," he said.

"Red Rose, tawny Rose," she began, reaching out her hand for the wine again, "wild Rose, thorny Rose—"

"No," he said, putting his hand over the mouth of the bottle, "you've had quite enough." A little excited her. He must damp her excitement. There were people listening.

"A damned unpleasant thing," he said, "being in prison."

She drew back her glass.

"Well, I've enjoyed it. Thanks, Martin," she said. "Thank you for my good lunch." She looked down at

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her plate and began arranging the stones of her plums. She lapsed like her mother, Martin thought; the engine of the brain seemed cut off—except when she laughed. Then she was not like her mother. She took him back to his past. It was impossible to talk. Too many people were talking; they were smoking too. Smoke mixed with the smell of meat made the air heavy. He was thinking of his past. He roused himself.

"Shall we go?" he said. "If you've had enough?" He beckoned to the waiter, who came with alacrity and totted up the bill. Martin laid a sovereign on the plate; Sara began to thrust her arms into the sleeves of her coat.

"Shall I come with you?" he said, helping her. It struck him as he did so that the coat perhaps belonged to Eugénie; "to the Round Pond at four? Sure," he said, smiling, "it wasn't the Serpentine, Sal, at six?"

She laughed.

Here the waiter came up with the change and he began to slip it in his pocket. He kept back one coin for the tip. But as he was about to give it, he was struck by something shifty in Alfred's expression. . . . He flicked up the flap of the bill; a two-shilling piece lay beneath it. It was the usual trick. He lost his temper.

"What's this?" he said angrily.

"Didn't know it was there, sir," the waiter stammered.

Martin felt his blood rise to his ears. He felt exactly like his father in a rage; as if he had white spots above his temples. He pocketed the coin that he had been going to give the waiter; and he marched past him, brushing aside his hand. The man slunk back with a murmur.

"Let's be off," he said, hustling Sara along the crowded room. "Let's get out of this."

He hurried her out into the street. The fug, the warm meaty smell of the City chop-house, had suddenly become intolerable.

"How I hate being cheated!" he said as he put on his hat.

"Sorry, Sara," he apologised. "I oughtn't to have taken you there. It's a beastly hole."

He drew in a breath of fresh air. The street noises, the unconcerned, business-like look of things, were refreshing after the hot steamy room. There were the carts waiting, drawn up along the street; and the packages sliding down into them from the warehouses. Again they came out in front of St. Paul's. He looked up. There was the same old lady still feeding the pigeons. And there was the Cathedral. He wished he could feel again the sense of weights changing in his body and coming to a stop; but the queer thrill of some correspondence between his own body and the stone no longer came to him. He felt nothing except anger. Also, Sara was there. He was distracted. She was about to cross the crowded road. He put out his hand to stop her. "Take care," he said. Then they crossed.

"Shall we walk?" he asked. She nodded. They began to walk along Fleet Street. Conversation was impossible. The pavement was so narrow that he had to step on and off in order to keep beside her. He still felt the discomfort of anger, but the anger itself was cooling. What ought I to have done? he thought, seeing himself brush past the waiter without giving him a tip. Not that; he thought, no, not that. People pressing against him made him leap off the pavement. He felt a little

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mean, for, after all, the poor devil had to make a living. He liked being generous: he liked to leave people smiling; and two shillings meant nothing to him. But what's the use, he thought, now it's done? He began to hum his little song—and then stopped, remembering that he was with someone.

"Look at that, Sal," he said, clutching at her arm. "Look at that!"

He pointed at the splayed-out figure at Temple Bar; it looked as ridiculous as usual—something between a serpent and a fowl.

"Look at that!" he repeated laughing. They paused for a moment to look at the little flattened figures lodged so uncomfortably against the pediment of Temple Bar: Queen Victoria: King Edward. Then they walked on. It was impossible to talk because of the crowd. Men in wigs and gowns were hurrying across the street: some carried red bags others blue bags.

"The Law Courts," he said pointing at the sheer mass of decorated stone. Pepper-boxes conglomerated, he thought.

"Where Morris spends his time," he said aloud.

He still felt uncomfortable at having lost his temper. But the feeling was passing. There was still little roughness in his mind.

"D'you think I ought to have been a barrister?" he asked.

"Ought to have been?" she asked, bending towards him. "What?" She had not caught his words in the roar of the traffic. It was useless to try to talk, but at any rate the feeling that he had lost his temper was diminishing. That little sting was being successfully smoothed over. Then it came back again because he saw a beggar selling violets. And that poor devil, he thought, had to go without his tip because he cheated me. . . . He fixed his eyes on a pillar-box. Then he looked at a car. It was odd how soon one got used to a car without a horse, he thought. They used to look ridiculous. Then they passed the woman selling violets. She wore a straw hat. He dropped a sixpence in her tray to make amends to the waiter. He shook his head. No violets, he meant; and indeed they were faded. But he caught sight of her face; it was seamed, white, smooth; and she had no nose.

"Let's cross," he said abruptly. He took Sara's arm and made her cross between two omnibuses. She must have seen such sights often; he had, often; but not together—that made a difference. He felt uncomfortable. He hurried her on to the further pavement.

"We'll get a bus," he said. "Come along!"

He took her by the elbow to make her step out briskly. But it was impossible; a cart blocked the way; then there were people. They were approaching Charing Cross. It was like the piers of a bridge; people were being sucked in instead of water. They had to stop. Newspaper boys were holding placards against their legs. Men and women were buying papers: some loitered; others snatched them. Martin bought one and held it in his hand.

"We'll wait here," he said. "The bus'll come." An old straw hat with a purple ribbon round it, he thought opening his paper. The sight persisted. He looked up. The station clock's always fast, he assured a man who was hurrying to catch a train. Always fast, he said to himself as he opened the paper. He turned to look at the financial page. Omnibus after omnibus stopped for

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a moment, then swooped off again. It was difficult to concentrate on the column of little figures; but he wanted to bury something disagreeable. The old straw hat—

"This is ours," he said, looking up as the right bus came. They climbed on top and sat side by side overlooking the driver.

"Two to Hyde Park Corner," he said, producing a handful of silver, and looked through the pages of the evening paper; but it was only an early edition.

"Nothing in it," he said, stuffing the paper under the seat. "And now—" he began, filling his pipe. They were running smoothly down the incline of Piccadilly. "—where my old father used to sit," he broke off, waving his pipe at windows. " . . . and now"—he lit a match, "—and now, Sally, you can say whatever you like. Nobody's listening. Say something," he added, throwing his match overboard, "very profound."

He turned to her. He wanted her to speak. But having walked in the open air and drunk wine, she was silent. Down they dipped; up they swooped again. He wanted her to speak; or he must speak himself. And what could he say? He had buried his feeling. But some emotion remained. He wanted her to speak it: but she was silent. No, he thought, biting the stem of his pipe. I won't say it. If I did she'd think me . . . Here, to his relief, the bus stopped and he got up.

The season was beginning. At this hour of the afternoon there was already a stream of cars. Women in pale summer dresses; men in tail coats; horses; carriages . . . everyone looked festive. The beds were full of flowers. Green chairs were drawn up at the edge of the Row. They were full of people looking in front of them, as if they had taken seats at a play. Riders cantered to the end of the Row; pulled up their horses; turned and cantered the other way. The sun was shining. The west wind moved white clouds, grained with gold, toppling, moving slowly across the sky. The windows of Park Lane shone with blue and gold reflections.

"Come along," he said; "come—come!" He stepped out briskly. I'm young, he thought; I'm in the prime of life. There was a tang of earth in the air; even in the Park there was some faint smell of spring, of the country.

"How I like—" he said aloud. He looked round. He had spoken to the empty air. Sara had lagged behind; there she was, tying her shoe-lace. But he felt as if he had missed a step going downstairs.

"What a fool one feels when one talks aloud to oneself," he said as she came up. She pointed.

"But look," she said, "they all do it."

A middle-aged woman was coming towards them. She was talking to herself. Her lips moved; she was gesticulating with her hand.

"It's the spring," he said, as she passed them.

"No. Once in winter I came here," she said, "and there was a negro laughing aloud in the snow."

"In the snow," said Martin. "A negro." The sun was bright on the grass; they were passing a bed in which the many-coloured hyacinths were curled and glossy.

"Don't let's think of the snow," he said. "Let's think—" A young woman was wheeling a perambulator; a sudden thought came into his head. "Maggie," he said. "Tell me. I haven't seen her since her baby

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was born. What's she doing? And I've never met the Frenchman—what d'you call him?—René."

"Renny," she said. She was still under the influence of the wine; of the wandering airs; of the people passing. He too felt the same distraction; but he wanted to end it.

"Yes. What's he like, this man René; Renny?"

He pronounced the word first in the French way; then as she did, in the English. He wanted to wake her. He took her arm.

"Renny!" Sara repeated. She threw her head back and laughed. "Let me see," she said. "He wears a red tie with white spots. And he has dark eyes. And he takes an orange—suppose we're at dinner, and says, looking straight at you, 'This orange, Sara—'" She rolled her r's.

"He's a chemist?" said Martin.

"Yes. 'Science,' he says, 'is the religion of the future'. . . . Or 'Time,' she waved her hand, "is a figment of the imagination." Then the bell rings. 'Curse that bell!' he says. 'I shall go.' . . . Up he gets. . . . There's another person talking to himself." She broke off. A young man came past them in a closely buttoned-up coat as if he had no shirt. He was muttering as he walked. He scowled at them as he passed them.

"But Renny?" said Martin.

"Yes," she resumed. "Science is the religion of the future. This is after dinner. He pours himself out a glass of wine—"

"Of wine?" said Martin. Half listening, he had visualised an earnest French professor. Then why did she say "wine"?

"Yes, wine," she repeated. "He's very fond of wine. His father was a merchant," she continued. "A man with a black beard; a merchant at Bordeaux. And one day," she continued, "when he was a little boy—Renny—playing in the garden, there was a tap on the window. 'Don't make so much noise. Play further away,' said a woman in a white cap. His mother was dead. . . . And he was afraid to tell his father . . . the horse was too big to ride . . . and they sent him to England. . . ."

She jumped over a railing.

"And then what happened?" said Martin, joining her.

"They became engaged?"

"There was a party; she went wearing a dress—a dress with green rays. And there was a tree, there was a flower"—she waved her hand at trees, at flowers—they were passing a bed of flowers. "But they looked extraordinarily odd. They walked in a garden in the moonlight," she explained.

"And then?" said Martin. He waited, but she said no more. So she married him, he thought. He was jealous for a moment. The air puffed soft in their faces. There was a sweetness in it too. The Park was full of couples walking together; everything seemed fresh, yet tinged with sadness. She is happy, he thought. Through the rushing of wheels and the barking of dogs he remembered . . . but Sara nudged him.

"D'you notice how people dislike being looked at?" she said.

A lady passed them, talking to herself. As they looked at her she turned and whistled, as if she were calling her dog.

"And she hasn't got a dog," said Sara. The dog she

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had whistled was another person's dog. It bounded off in the opposite direction; the lady hurried on, pursing her lips together.

Martin stopped. They had been walking in the wrong direction.

"Look here," he said, "we've gone the wrong way."

They had been walking very fast in the direction of the Marble Arch. They were near the bald rubbed space where the speakers congregate. The sound of voices floated out to them. Meetings were in full swing. Groups of various sizes had gathered round the different orators. Mounted on their platforms, or sometimes only on boxes, the speakers were holding forth. The voices became more distinct as they approached.

"Let's listen," said Martin. A man was leaning forward holding a slate in his hand. They could hear him saying, "Ladies and gentlemen..." They stopped in front of him. "Fix your eyes on me," he was saying. They fixed their eyes on him. "Don't be afraid," he said. He had an ingratiating manner. He turned his slate over. "Do I look like a Jew?" he asked. Then he turned his slate over and looked on the other side. And they heard him say that his mother was born in Bermondsey, as they strolled on, and his father in the Isle of— The voice died away.

"What about this chap?" said Martin. Here was a large man, banging on the rail of his platform.

"Fellow citizens!" he was shouting. They stopped. The crowd of loafers, errand-boys and nursemaids gaped up at him with their mouths falling open and their eyes gazing blankly. His hand raked in the line of cars that was passing with a superb gesture of scorn. His shirt appeared under his waistcoat.

"Joostice and liberty," said Martin, repeating his words, as the fist thumped on the railing. They waited. Then it all came over again.

"But he's a jolly good speaker," said Martin, turning away. "And now, what's the old lady saying?" They strolled on.

The old lady's audience was extremely small. Her voice was hardly audible. She held a little book in her hand and she was saying something about sparrows. But her voice tapered off into a thin frail pipe. A chorus of little boys imitated her.

"Yes, yes, yes," said Martin, "but we must come along, Sal." He put his hand on her shoulder and drew her on. "He's a jolly good speaker," he repeated, as they passed the fat man who was still exhorting the crowd of errand boys and loafers who gaped up at him to follow him to the land of... the voices grew fainter and fainter. Soon they ceased altogether.

They walked on across the smooth slope that rose and fell in front of them like a length of green cloth striped, this way and that, with straight brown paths.

"And that poor old lady whom nobody listened to..." he said. There was something comic, yet tragic, about the scene. He looked in front of him. Great white dogs were gambolling; a woman was throwing sticks for them; through the trees he could see the blue-and-silver waters of the Serpentine set with little boats.

"Joostice and liberty," said Martin. "He's quite right," he added. "Still—" He swung his stick. The urbanity of the Park, the gleam of the Serpentine, the charming lay-out of the ground at that point, as if somebody had designed it affected him agreeably.

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The gulls were rising and falling at the water's edge, and cutting the air into patterns with their sharp white wings. "Did you agree with him?" he asked, as they crossed the bridge. "The fat man, who waved his arms?"

"Oi, Oi, Oi!" she laughed, throwing out her hand. She imitated the Cockney accent in which he had spoken.

Yes, Martin thought, "I"—it was a word that came fairly frequently to the lips of the Hyde Park orators. Each had his own private nostrum for the cure of the world. Joostice and liberty—he was right of course; but there would be very little joostice or liberty for the likes of him, he thought, if that fat man had his way.

"And the poor old lady whom nobody listened to," he said, "talking about sparrows..." There was a mixture of comedy and tragedy in the scene.

They had crossed the bridge. A long row of cars and carriages was drawn up by the kerb. Inside Kensington Gardens striped umbrellas were opened over the little round tables where people already sat waiting for their tea. Waitresses were hurrying about with trays; the season had begun. An elderly lady, fashionably dressed with a purple feather dipping down on one side of her hat, sat there as if she were waiting for her guests to arrive. The sun dappled the table and gave her a curious look of transparency, as if she were caught in a net of light; as if she were composed of lozenges of floating colours. Martin half thought that he knew her; he half raised his hat. But she sat there looking in front of her; her face was impassive. No, he thought; he did not know her, and he stopped for a moment to light his pipe. But what would the world be, he said to himself—he was still thinking of the fat man brandishing his arm—without "I" in it? He lit the match. He looked at the flame that had become almost invisible in the sun. He stood for a second drawing at his pipe. Sara had walked on. She too was netted with floating lights from between the leaves. A primal innocence seemed to brood over the scene. The birds were making a curious chirping sound in the branches; the roar of London encircled the open space in a ring of distant but complete sound. The pink and white chestnut blossoms rode up and down as the branches moved in the breeze. The sun dappling the leaves gave everything a curious look of insubstantiality as if it were broken into separate points of light.

"Come along, Sal," he said, overtaking her. "Let's enjoy the present. The Round Pond at four." As they walked down the avenue that led up to the view of Kensington Palace with the phantom silhouette of the church in the distance, the size of the human figure seemed to have shrunk. Instead of full-grown people, children were now in the majority. Dogs of all sorts abounded. The air was full of barking and sudden shrill cries. Coveys of nursemaids pushed perambulators along the paths. Babies lay fast asleep in them like images of faintly tinted wax; their perfectly smooth eyelids fitted over their eyes as if they sealed them completely.

Sara had looked like that the first time he saw her, he thought, looking at a sleeping child on its pillow. In the hall in Browne Street, asleep in her perambulator.

He stopped short. They had reached the Pond. "Where's Maggie?" he said. "There—is that her?"

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He pointed to a young woman who was lifting a baby out of its perambulator.

"Where?" said Sara. She looked in the wrong direction.

He pointed.

"There, under that tree."

"Yes," she said, "that's Maggie."

They walked in that direction.

"But is it?" said Martin. He was suddenly doubtful. She had the unconsciousness of a person who is unaware that she is being looked at. With one hand she was holding the child; with the other she was arranging the pillows of the perambulator.

"Yes," he said noticing something about her gesture, "that's her."

She turned and saw them.

She held up her hand as if she wanted them to approach quietly. She put a finger to her lips. The child was not asleep. They approached silently. "Sit down," she said, in a low voice. She glanced at the child; its eyes were shut.

Martin dragged up two chairs.

"We met," he said in a whisper, "at St. Paul's."

As he spoke the distant sound of a clock striking was wafted on the breeze.

"You needn't talk in a whisper," said Maggie in her ordinary voice. "He's asleep."

"We met at St. Paul's," said Martin in his ordinary voice. "I'd been seeing my stockbroker." He took off his hat and laid it on the grass.

"And he took me to lunch at a City chop-house," said Sara. The clock was striking its fourth stroke.

"You're very punctual," said Maggie. They lay back in their chairs. The scene was admirably composed. There was the white figure of Queen Victoria against a green bank; beyond, was the red brick of the old palace; the Round Pond was in front of them. A race of yachts was going forward. The boats leant on their sides so that the sails touched the water. There was a nice little breeze.

"And what did you talk about?" said Maggie.

Martin could not remember. "She was tipsy," he said, pointing to Sara. "And now she's going to sleep." She lay back in her chair. He felt sleepy himself. The sun for the first time was almost hot on his head.

"What were you doing," Maggie asked, "at your stockbrokers?"

"Settling my affairs," he said.

"So you're rich are you?" she said rather absent-mindedly. Gulls were screaming as they rose and sank over someone who was feeding them. She was watching them. He looked at her.

"I haven't seen you," he said, since your baby was born." It's changed her, having a child, he thought. It's improved her, he thought. But she was watching the gulls; an old lady had thrown a handful of fish.

"D'you like having a child?" he said.

"Yes," she said, rousing herself to answer him. "It's a tie. Nurse has her day out," she explained.

"And you have to mind the baby," he said. "But it's nice having ties, isn't it?" he enquired. He was fond of children. He looked at the sleeping baby with its eyes sealed and its thumb in its mouth.

"D'you want them?" she asked.

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"Just what I was asking myself," he said, "before—"

Here Sara made a click at the back of her throat; he dropped his voice to a whisper. "I met her at St. Paul's," he said. They were silent. The baby was asleep; Sara was asleep; the presence of the two sleepers seemed to enclose them in a circle of privacy. Two of the racing yachts were coming together as if they must collide; but one passed just ahead of the other. Martin watched them. "Did I ever tell you—" he began, and hesitated.

"About the woman you're in love with?" she murmured.

"Yes," he said. She knew what he meant before he said it. "Love ought to stop on both sides, don't you think?" he remarked. He spoke without any stress on the words so as not to wake the sleepers. "But it won't—that's the devil," he added in the same monotone.

"Bored, are you?" she murmured.

"Stiff," he said. "Bored stiff." He stooped and disinterred a pebble in the grass.

"And jealous?" she murmured. Her voice was very low and soft.

"Horribly," he whispered. It was true, now that she referred to it. Here the baby half woke and stretched out its hand. Maggie rocked the perambulator. Sara stirred. Their privacy was imperilled. It would be destroyed at any moment, he felt; and he wanted to talk. "May I come," he murmured as she soothed the child, "and see you alone?"

She nodded. They both glanced apprehensively at the sleepers. The baby had shut its eyes. Sara snored. "But where do you live?" he said. He wrote the address in his pocket-book. Another race was starting; men crouched at the edge of the pond, each with his stick resting on a toy boat, as they waited for the signal to be given. Dogs barked; little boys crowded; off the boats went.

"A nice little boy," said Martin, looking at the baby. "What d'you call him?"

She told him. And will he go through the whole thing too? he thought, thinking of his jealousy. "My father," he said aloud, "had a lady." He thought of the letters in his father's drawer. "And she called him Bogy."

Maggie laughed. "So I thought when he came to tea in the nursery," she said. She kept her voice low and equable as did his. The sense of privacy had returned. The sleepers slept soundly. They were once more enclosed.

"Was he in love," he asked, "with your mother?"

"He brought her flowers," she murmured.

"And are you, d'you think"—he paused and spoke very gently—"your father's daughter?"

She laughed out loud. The baby opened its eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've woken him."

The child opened both its eyes. It uncurled its fingers. It stretched out and cried.

"It's time we went," said Maggie.

Martin took up his hat. He felt content. It was a charming scene, gay, innocent, a trifle ridiculous; with the toy boats racing; the statue; and beyond that the phantom spire of some church. The clock was striking. Little coveys of perambulators were starting home. Children were being called back by their nurses. They were being sharply told not to lag behind. He felt

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peaceful: as if she had answered some question. Sara slept still.

"Wake up," said Maggie, touching her on the knee.

She opened her eyes but she shut them again.

"No, no," she protested, stretching her arms over her head.

"It's time," said Maggie. Sara sat up.

"How odd it all looks!" she exclaimed, rubbing her eyes. "Martin!" she exclaimed, as if she were bringing him back to the field of vision. He stood there in his neat blue suit with his stick in his hand.

"Did you hear what we've been saying?" he asked her.

"Voices," she yawned, "only voices."

"Well, I must be off," he said, turning away.

"Where?" said Maggie.

"To dine with a cousin in Grosvenor Square," he said.

He left them.

He looked back after he had walked a little distance. They were still standing by the perambulator under the trees. What are they saying? he wondered. Talking about me? He walked on. Then he looked back again. The ground sloped and the trees were hidden. A very stout lady was being tugged along the path by a small dog on a chain. He could see them no longer. The invisible thread that bound him to Maggie thinned and thinned, but did not altogether snap: it anchored somewhere. He liked her, especially now that she had a child. That had improved her, he thought.

He would get a cab at the gate. It was still early, but he liked to have plenty of time in which to make himself smart. All the same what folly it was, he thought as he hailed his taxi, to spend the evening talking, in a white waistcoat, when he might have sat by himself and read a book.

The evening had deepened as he drove to Grosvenor Square. There were lights in the street. The door opened almost before he had touched the bell, as if he had trod on a spring. The door opened, and two footmen started forward to take his things directly he entered the black-and-white-paved hall. A third footman had been a little too deft in peeling the elderly gentleman who had arrived before him. He was settling his coat again and giving a little touch to his tie, this side and that, as he walked upstairs. Martin followed him.

It was an imposing staircase, of white marble, sweeping in a curve; and a succession of large dark pictures hung on the wall. Martin paused to let the elderly man precede him.

"Canaletto—or school of?" he thought, glancing at a yellow-and-blue picture of Venetian palaces and pale-green canals. "And that," he thought—a whole tree, covered with little pink flowers, stood in a china tub just outside the drawing-room door—"came up from the country." He gave his name to the footman.

"Captain Pargiter," the man boomed out. He saw the large room sprinkled with people; and Kitty standing near the door. She gave him her hand; she looked burnished and fashionable in her tight gleaming red dress. He moved on, for other guests were arriving.

"A saloon?" he said to himself. The room, with the chandelier hanging from the centre, with panels of yellow brocade let into the walls, and sofas and chairs

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dotted about, had the air of a grandiose waiting-room.

Yes, saloon, he said to himself, again looking round. It was very imposing. Seven or eight people were standing about talking. He knew most of them slightly. The old lady ensconced in the armchair, with the wedge-shaped face and little ferrety eyes, was a famous character in her way. But it's not going to work this time, he said to himself, as he chatted with a grizzled man. Sometimes parties work, sometimes they don't work; they were getting to work rather intermittently as far as he was concerned. He glanced at Kitty's portrait by a fashionable portrait-painter, over the great carved fireplace, as he chatted, standing first on this foot, then on that, with the grizzled man. Then his host came in, with apologies. He had been racing. His face shone as if only that moment it had been taken out of the sun. You almost expected, Martin thought, nodding to him, to see a pair of glasses slung round his shoulders, just as there was a mark across his forehead where his hat had been. He had only got back—from Newmarket, was it?—just in time for dinner.

No, it's not going to work, Martin repeated as he talked about horses. He heard a paper-boy calling in the street below; and the hooting of cars. He preserved clearly his sense of the identity of different objects, and their differences. When a party worked, sounds merged into one. He looked round to see whom he would take down to dinner. Lady Margaret Marable, he hoped, for he liked that vivacious lady. But here Kitty came up and introduced a girl all in white whom he had noticed standing by herself.

"Miss Ann Hillier," she said. "My cousin, Captain Pargiter."

She stood for a moment beside them as if to facilitate their introduction. But she was a little stiff always; she did nothing but flick her fan up and down.

"Been to the races, Kitty?" Martin said, because he knew that she hated racing, and he always felt a wish to tease her.

"I? No; I don't go to races," she replied rather shortly. She turned away because somebody else had come in.

I should have been better off, he thought, reading my book.

"Have you been to the races?" he said aloud to the girl whom he was to take down to dinner. She shook her head. She had white arms; a white dress; and a pearl necklace. Purely virginal, he said to himself; and only an hour ago I was lying stark naked in my bath in Ebury Street, he thought.

"I've been watching polo," she said. He looked down at his shoes, and noticed that they had creases across them; they were old; he had meant to buy a new pair, but had forgotten.

"Was it a good game?" he asked. What on earth, he wondered, would they find to say to each other at dinner?

Now they were going down to dinner; he gave her his arm. They went down the stairs, and as he watched the lady's skirt in front of them trailing from step to step he glanced again at the Canaletto. It was a good picture: whether a copy or not he was not sure. They crossed the black-and-white squares.

The dining-room was harmoniously shrouded. The lights were arranged so that the dinner-table glowed; and the pictures with hooded bars of light under them

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shone out too; but no light shone directly on their faces. It seemed to him, as they looked for their places, that they were assembled privately—the dining-room was at the back of the house, in muffled luxury from the world outside. He sat down on a leather armchair with a coat of arms stamped on the back.

If this doesn't work, he thought, glancing at the menu, I'll never do it again. He looked up. The usual eighteenth-century portrait of a nobleman with white legs, a crimson cloak and a star, hung in front of them over the sideboard. Which was it? he wondered. The man who lost us— But he braced himself to talk to the virginal girl who sat beside him. She was so young that he had to reject almost everything that came into his head.

"I've thought of three subjects to talk about," he began straight off, without thinking how the sentence was going to end. "Racing; the Russian ballet; and"—he hesitated for a moment—"Ireland. Which interests you?" He unfolded his napkin.

"Please," she said, bending slightly towards him, "say that again."

He laughed. She had a charming way of putting her head on one side and bending towards him.

"Don't let's talk of any of them," he said. "Let's talk of something interesting. Do you enjoy parties?" he asked her. He would make her talk about herself. She was dipping her spoon in her soup. She looked up at him as she lifted it with eyes that seemed like bright stones under a film. They're like pieces of glass under water, he thought. She was extraordinarily pretty.

"But I've only been to three parties in my life!" she said. She gave a charming little laugh.

"You don't say so!" he exclaimed. "This is the third, then; or is it the fourth?"

He listened to the sounds in the street. He could just hear the cars hooting; but they had gone far away; they made a continuous rushing sound. It was beginning to work. He held out his glass; his glass was filled with champagne. He would like her to say, he thought, as his glass was filled, "What a charming man I sat next!" when she went to bed that night.

"This is my third *real* party," she said, stressing the word "real" in a way that seemed to him slightly pathetic.

She must have been in the nursery three months ago, he thought. I'll make her enjoy it.

"And I was thinking as I shaved," he said, "that I would never go to a party again." It was true; he had wanted to read; but somebody had taken the book; he saw again the empty space where the Life of Wren should have been; he had seen it as he shaved. Could he talk to her about—what? What little piece of his vast accumulation of knowledge and experience could he break off to give her? he wondered.

"Do you live in London?" she asked. There was going to be no difficulty; she was admirably trained in the mechanics of polite conversation.

"Ebury Street," he told her. And she knew Ebury Street, because it was on the way to Victoria; she often went to Victoria, because they had a house in Sussex; and they discussed railway stations; whether she preferred London or the country; and whether it was worse to have to shave or to do one's hair.

"And now tell me," he said, feeling that they had

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broken the ice—when she turned her head to answer some remark of the man on the other side. He was annoyed. Why should that man break in? He was very young and had sandy hair that looked as if a rake had been drawn through it. A racing man, Martin summed him up. The whole fabric that he had been building, like a game of spillikins in which one frail little bone is hooked on top of another, was dashed to the ground. Ann was talking as if she had known that man all her life. Martin sat silent. The lady on his right—Lady Margaret Marrable—was engrossed in an argument. She was talking vivaciously. He looked at the great portrait opposite which shone out, red and white, under the black hood. A footman was standing beneath it. A row of decanters obscured the folds of the cloak on the floor. That's the third earl, or the fourth? he asked himself. He knew his eighteenth century. The first earl had been a lawyer; the second a soldier; it was the third who had been jockeyed into a place in the Cabinet, and made the great marriage. But after all, the Rigbys, he thought, looking at Kitty at the head of the table, the Rigbys are a better family than they are. He smiled. He checked himself. I only think that when I dine in this sort of place, he thought. But here Lady Margaret turned on him.

"I'm sure you'll agree with me," she said—he noticed that she swept her eyes over the name on his card—"Captain Pargiter, that it's a devilish thing to have done!"

She spoke so pouncingly that the fork she held upright seemed like a weapon with which she might be going to pinion him. He threw himself into the conversation. They were talking politics, of course. She swept off again; she was a keen politician; but out of office; she belonged to the opposite side. He glanced round the table as he listened to her vigorous denunciation. The man next her was an ex-Cabinet Minister; then there was the wife of a Bishop; and there—the table curved round—was Kitty listening to a famous peer.

"Tell me—what's your opinion?" Lady Margaret demanded, as if his opinion mattered. He invented an opinion. For a moment he had the illusion that he too was behind the scenes; that the screen was down; the lights were up; and that he too was behind the screen. An agreeable sensation? Rather. It was nonsense, of course; they were only throwing him scraps from their larder; he was only a Captain Pargiter whose name Lady Margaret, though she had met him dozens of times, never remembered. Now she was off again; she was holding forth to her end of the table.

The distinguished old man, he observed, had let down a mask of infinitely wise tolerance over his face as she harangued them. And she was very clever. He was arranging three crusts of bread by the side of his plate as if he were playing a mysterious little game of profound significance. "So," he seemed to be saying, "So," as if they were fragments of human destiny that he held in his fingers. The mask might conceal anything. Or nothing? It was a mask of great distinction, to be sure. But here Lady Margaret pinioned him too with her fork, calling him by a nickname. The old man raised his eyebrows and moved one of the crusts a little to one side before he spoke.

"When I was in Ireland," he began, "in 1880 . . ." Martin bent forward to listen. He spoke very simply. He was offering them a memory; nothing could have

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been done more modestly. There was a voice behind the mask. A real voice? A muffled voice. Whether the crusts had moved him, or whether he had moved the crusts, Martin, listening respectfully, found it impossible to say. Anyhow he told his story perfectly. And he had played a great part. And it was composed; compact; it held its meaning without spilling a single drop. Martin was impressed. Here we are, he thought, going on, on, on—and he looked down the room at the pictures, and saw a grey-green dress in another picture; Gainsborough's picture; the famous picture. Who was it? The lady who had married—but he was conscious that Ann had turned to him. Her talk was over. She was asking him:

"Do tell me"—she bent her head to the right—"who he is?" She was under the impression that he knew everybody, apparently. He was flattered. He looked along the table. Who was it? He knew him; but he did not know him. It was somebody he had met; somebody, he guessed, who was not quite at his ease.

"I know him," he said. "I know him—" He had a rather white, fat face; he was talking away at a great rate. And the young married woman to whom he was talking was saying "I see; I see," with little nods of her head. But there was a slight bewilderment on her face, as if she had not entirely understood. You needn't put yourself to all that trouble, my good fellow, Martin felt inclined to say to him. She doesn't understand a word you're saying to her.

"I can't put a name to him," said Martin, turning to Ann. "But I've met him—let me see—where? In Oxford or Cambridge?"

A faint look of amusement came into Ann's eyes. She had spotted the difference. She coupled them together. They were not her world—no.

"Have you seen the Russian dancers?" she was saying. She had been there with her young man, it seemed. And what's your world, Martin thought, as she rapped out her slender stock of adjectives—"heavenly," "amazing," "marvellous," and so on. Is it *the* world? he mused. He looked down the table. Anyhow no other world had a chance against it, he thought. And it's a good world too, he added; large; generous; hospitable. And very nice-looking. He glanced from face to face. Dinner was drawing to an end. They all looked as if they had been rubbed with wash leather, like precious stones; yet the bloom seemed ingrained; it went through the stone. And the stone was clear-cut; there was no blur, no indecision. Here a footman's white-gloved hand removing dishes knocked over a glass of wine. Ann stopped what she was saying. The red splash trickled onto the lady's dress. But she did not move a muscle; she went on talking. Then she straightened the clean napkin that had been brought her nonchalantly over the stain.

That's what I like, Martin thought. He admired that. She would have blown her fingers on her nose like an applewoman if she wanted to, he thought. But Ann was talking.

"And when he gives that leap!" she exclaimed—"she raised her hand with a lovely gesture in the air—"and then comes down!" She let her hand fall in her lap.

"Marvellous!" Martin agreed. He had got the very accent, he thought; he had got it from the young man whose hair looked as if a rake had gone through it.

"Yes: Nijinski's marvellous," he agreed. One would

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soon get the hang of it, if one dined here every night, he thought; he half wished he did; he half wished he didn't.

"And my aunt has asked me to meet him at a party," said Ann. And what will they say to each other when they do meet "at a party"? Martin wondered.

"Your aunt?" he said aloud.

She mentioned a well-known name.

"Oh, she's your aunt, is she?" he said. He placed her. So that was her world. He wanted to ask her—for he found her charming in her youth, her simplicity—but it was too late. Ann was rising.

"I hope—" he began. She bent her head towards him as if she longed to stay and catch his last word; but alas, could not, since Lady Lasswade had risen; and it was necessary for her to go.

Lady Lasswade had risen; everybody rose. All the pink, grey, sea-coloured dresses lengthened themselves and for a moment the tall women standing by the table looked like the famous Gainsborough hanging on the wall. The table, strewn with napkins and wine-glasses, had a derelict air as they left it. For a moment the ladies clustered at the door; then the little old woman in black hobbled past them with remarkable dignity; and Kitty, coming last, put her arm round Ann's shoulder and led her out.

"I hope you liked my old cousin?" she said to Ann a little perfunctorily as they walked upstairs together. She put her hand to her dress and straightened something as they passed a looking-glass.

"I thought him charming!" Ann exclaimed. "And what a lovely tree!" She spoke of Martin and the tree in exactly the same tone. They paused for a moment to look at the tree that was covered with pink blossoms in the china tub. Some of the flowers were fully out; others were still unopened. As they looked a petal dropped.

"But it's cruel to keep it here," said Kitty, "in this hot air."

They went in. While they dined the servants had opened the folding doors and lit lights in a further room so that it seemed as if they came into another room freshly made ready for them. There was a great fire blazing between two stately fire-dogs; but it seemed cordial and decorative rather than hot. Two or three of the ladies stood before it, opening and shutting their fingers as they spread them to the blaze; but they turned to make room for their hostess.

"How I love that picture of you, Kitty!" said Mrs Aislabie, looking up at the portrait of Lady Lasswade as a young woman. Her hair had been very red in those days; she was toying with a basket of roses. The artist had given the impression of youth, fiery but tender, emerging from a cloud of white muslin.

Kitty glanced at it and then looked away.

"One never likes one's own picture," she said.

"But it's the image of you!" said another lady.

"Not now," said Kitty, laughing off the compliment rather awkwardly. Always after dinner women paid each other compliments about their clothes or their looks, she thought. She did not like being alone with women after dinner; it made her shy. She stood there, upright among them, while footmen went round with trays of coffee.

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"By the way, I hope the wine—" she paused and helped herself to coffee, "the wine didn't stain your frock, Cynthia?" she said to the young married woman who had taken the disaster so coolly.

"And such a lovely frock," said Lady Margaret, taking the folds of golden satin between her finger and thumb.

"Do you like it?" said the young woman.

"It's perfectly lovely! I've been looking at it the whole evening!" said Mrs Treyer, an Oriental-looking woman, with a feather floating back from her head in harmony with her nose, which was Jewish.

Kitty looked at them admiring the lovely frock. Eleanor would have found herself out of it, she thought, Eleanor had refused her invitation to dinner. She had made some excuse; not her father now; but something else.

"Do tell me," Lady Cynthia, interrupted, "who was the man I sat next? One always meets such interesting people here," she added.

"The man you sat next?" said Kitty. She considered a moment. "Oh yes. Tommy Ashton," she said.

"Is that the man who's been lecturing on French poetry at Mortimer House?" chimed in Mrs Aislabie.

"I thought he was very clever," said Lady Cynthia.

"I longed to go to those lectures," said Mrs Aislabie.

"I heard they were wonderfully interesting."

"Mildred went," said Mrs Treyer.

"Why should we all stand?" said Kitty. She made a movement with her hands towards the seats. She did things like that, so abruptly that they called her, behind her back, "The Grenadier." They all moved this way and that, and she herself, after seeing how the couples sorted themselves, sat down by old Aunt Warburton, who was enthroned in the great chair.

"Tell me about my delightful godson," the old lady began. She meant Kitty's second son, who was with the fleet at Malta.

"He's at Malta—" she began. She sat down on a low chair and began answering her questions. But the fire was too hot for Aunt Warburton. She raised her knobbed old hand.

"Priestley wants to roast us all alive," said Kitty. She got up and went to the window. The ladies smiled at the way she strode across the room and jerked up the top of the long window. Just for a moment, as the curtains hung apart, she looked at the square outside. There was a spatter of leaf-shadow and lamplight on the pavement; the usual policeman was balancing himself as he patrolled; the usual little men and women, foreshortened from this height, were hurrying along by the railings. So she saw them hurrying, the other way, when she brushed her teeth in the morning. Then she came back and sat down on a low stool beside old Aunt Warburton. They never had much to say to each other; but she liked the worldly old woman. She was honest, in her way.

"And the little red-haired ruffian whom I love?" she asked. He was her favourite; the little boy at Eton.

"He's been in trouble," said Kitty. "He's been swished." She smiled. He was her favourite too.

The old lady grinned. She liked boys who got into trouble. She had a wedge-shaped yellow face with an occasional bristle on her chin; she was over eighty, but she always sat as if she were riding a hunter, Kitty thought, glancing at her hands. They were coarse

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hands, with big finger-joints; red and white sparks flashed from her rings as she moved them. Who had given her those rings?

"And you, my dear," said the old lady, looking at her shrewdly under her bushy eyebrows, "busy as usual?"

"Yes. Much as usual," said Kitty, evading the shrewd old eyes; for she did things on the sly that they—the ladies over there—did not approve.

They were chattering together. Yet animated as it seemed, to Kitty's ear the talk lacked substance. It was a battledore and shuttlecock talk, to be kept going until the door opened and the gentlemen came in. Then it would stop. They were talking about a by-election. She could hear Lady Margaret telling some story that was rather coarse presumably, in the eighteenth-century way, since she dropped her voice.

"—turned her upside down and slapped her," she could hear her say. There was a twitter of laughter.

"I'm so delighted he got in in spite of them," said Mrs Treyer. She could hear no more for they dropped their voices.

"I'm a tiresome old woman," said Aunt Warburton, raising one of her knobbed hands to her shoulder. "But now I'm going to ask you to shut that window." The draught was getting at her rheumatic joint.

"I'm so sorry," said Kitty. She strode to the window again. "Damn these women!" she said to herself. She laid hold of the long stick with a beak at the end that stood in the window and poked; but the window stuck. She would have liked to fleece them of their clothes, of their jewels, of their intrigues, of their gossip. They were waiting to pounce on the men when they came up, and then—would you give this, that or the other to the eternal Bob, Dick or Harry or whatever his name might be. The window went up with a jerk. There was Ann standing about with nobody to talk to when she turned round.

"Come and talk to us, Ann," she said, beckoning to her, and Ann drew up a footstool and sat down at Aunt Warburton's feet. There was a pause. Old Aunt Warburton disliked young girls; but they had relations in common.

"Where's Timmy, Ann?" she asked.

"Harrow," said Ann.

"Ah, you've always been to Harrow," said Aunt Warburton. And then the old lady, with the beautiful breeding that simulated at least human charity, flattered the girl, likening her to her grandmother, a famous beauty.

"How I should love to have known her!" Ann exclaimed. "Do tell me about her—what was she like?"

The old lady began making a selection from her memoirs; it was only a selection; an edition with asterisks; much was left out: she had been a famous beauty in the seventies and eighties. But it was a story that could hardly be told to a girl in white satin. Kitty's mind wandered. If Charles stayed much longer downstairs, she thought, glancing at the clock, she would not catch her train. Could Priestly be trusted to whisper a message in his ears? He was tired after racing and would drink too much, she thought. But she would give them another ten minutes, and she turned to Aunt Warburton again.

"She must have been wonderful!" Ann was saying. She had her hands clasped round her knees; she was

looking up into the face of the hairy old dowager. Kitty felt a moment's pity. She'll be just the same one of these days, she thought, looking at the little group of ladies on the other side of the room. And yet they're fine, she thought; brave, very generous. But they looked harassed. They give, she thought, just as much as they take. Had Eleanor, after all, any right to despise them? Had she done more with her life than Margaret Marrable? And I? she thought. And I? I was only eighteen when I married. Who's right? she thought. Who's... Here mercifully the door opened.

The gentlemen came in. They came in reluctantly, rather slowly, as if they had just stopped talking, and had to get their bearings in the drawing-room. They were a little flushed and still talking, as if they had stopped in the middle of what they were saying. They filed in; and the distinguished old man moved across the room with the air of a ship making port, and all the ladies stirred without rising. The game was over; the battledores and shuttlecocks put away. Now they had the look of gulls settling round a shoal of fish, Kitty thought. There was a rising and a fluttering. She stood still till the parts were again allotted. The great man let himself slowly down into a chair beside his old friend Lady Warburton. He put the tips of his fingers together and began "Well..." as if he were continuing a conversation left unfinished the night before. And there was something—was it human? civilised? she could not find the word she wanted—about the old couple, talking, as they had talked for the past fifty years. A long conversation in one house after another. . . . They were all talking. They had all settled in to add another sentence to the story that was just ending, or in the middle or about to begin.

But there was Tony Ashton standing by himself without any sentence to add to the story. She went up to him therefore.

"Have you seen Edward lately?" she said to him.

"I was sitting on a Committee with him the day before yesterday," he said in his funny little clipped voice.

"At Oxford?" said Kitty.

But he did not dine with her in order to talk about committees at Oxford. He would like to talk to some smart woman—Mrs Aislabie, or Margaret Marrable. But they were both engaged—both were adding sentences with considerable vivacity. She must find some young woman who read French. She looked round. There was a pause. She was not a good hostess, she reflected; this sort of little hitch always happened at her parties. She must find some woman who wouldn't think Tony a dreadful prig. There was Ann; Ann was about to be captured by a youth she knew. But Kitty beckoned. Ann came instantly and submissively.

"Come and be introduced," she said, "to Mr Ashton. He's been lecturing at Mortimer House," she explained, "about—" She hesitated.

"Mallarmé," he squeaked out.

Kitty turned away. Martin came up to her.

"A very brilliant party, Lady Lasswade," he said with his usual tiresome irony.

"This? Oh, not at all," she said brusquely. This wasn't a party. Her parties were never brilliant. Martin was trying to tease her as usual. She looked down and saw his shabby shoes.

"Come and talk to me," she said, feeling the old

family affection return. She noticed with amusement that he was a little flushed, a little, as the nurses used to say, "above himself", "showing off." How many parties would it need, she wondered, to turn her satirical, uncompromising cousin into an obedient member of society?

"Let's sit down and talk sense," she said, sinking on to a little sofa. He sat down beside her.

"Tell me, what's Nell doing?" she said.

"She sent her love," said Martin. "She told me to say how much she wanted to see you."

"Then why wouldn't she come tonight?" said Kitty. It hurt her, rather, that Eleanor would never come to her parties.

"She hasn't the right kind of hairpin," he said with a laugh, looking down at his shoes. Kitty looked down at them too.

"My shoes, you see, don't matter," he said. "But then I'm a man."

"It's such nonsense..." Kitty began. "What does it matter..."

But he was looking round him at the groups of beautifully dressed women; then at the picture.

"That's a horrid daub of you over the mantelpiece," he said, looking at the red-haired girl. "Who did it?"

"I forget his name. Don't let's look at it," she said.

Here Tony Ashton passed her, leading Ann away to a corner to talk about French poetry she supposed. She smiled. Still, Tony and Martin had a standard; something that she respected: so had her father, she thought. These people all looked worried.

"Who's that?" said Martin as they passed.

"Tony Ashton," she said. "You knew him at Oxford, didn't you?"

"Ashton, of course!" Martin exclaimed. "One of Edward's... but how prosperous he's got!"

"He's been lecturing at Mortimer House on French poetry," said Kitty.

Martin laughed.

"Why d'you laugh?" Kitty asked.

He did not answer. He was looking round the room; it was crowded; there were little tables with photographs; ornate cabinets on which were vases of flowers; brocade let into the walls. She felt that he was criticising her.

"I hate this room. It's like an hotel, isn't it?" she said.

"A saloon," he remarked.

He always wondered, not why she had refused Edward, but why she had married her husband.

"I was asking myself"—he dropped his voice—"why"—he hesitated—"have a picture like that"—he nodded at the fashionable portrait—"when they've a Gainsborough..."

"And why," she dropped her voice, imitating his tone that was half sneering, half humorous, "come and eat their food when you despise them?"

"I don't! Not a bit!" he exclaimed. "I'm enjoying myself immensely. I like seeing you, Kitty," he added. It was true—he always liked her. "You haven't dropped your poor relations. That's very nice of you."

"It's they who've dropped me," she said.

"Oh, Eleanor," he said. "She's a queer old bird."

"It's all so..." Kitty began. But there was something wrong about the disposition of her party; she stopped in the middle of her sentence. "You've got to

come and talk to Mrs Treyer," she said getting up.

Why does one do it? he wondered as he followed her. He had wanted to talk to Kitty; he had nothing to say to that Oriental-looking harpy with a pheasant's feather floating at the back of her head. Still, if you drink the good wine of the noble countess, he said bowing; you have to entertain her less desirable friends. He led her off.

Kitty went back to the fireplace. She dealt the coal a blow and the sparks went volleying up the chimney. A faint sweet smell of cedarwood stole into the room; her poker was a faggot made of cedarwood. Surreptitiously she noted that the hands of the clock were close on eleven. The party was bound to break up soon; it was only the prelude to another party. All her guests were going on. . . . The clock chimed a succession of petulant little strokes, on the last of which the door opened and Priestley advanced and looked round him with his inscrutable butler's eyes. He summoned Ann Hillier.

"That's Mamma fetching me," said Ann, advancing down the room with a little flutter.

"She's taking you on?" said Kitty. She held her hand for a moment. Why? she asked herself, looking at the lovely face, empty of meaning, of character, except youth, and a touching, eager joy. She held her hand. "Must you go," she said.

"I have loved it," said Ann, withdrawing her hand. Other people rose too. There was a general rising and movement.

"Coming with us?" Martin heard Ann say to the youth through whose hair the rake seemed to have been passed. He was. They turned to leave together. As she passed Martin, who stood with his hand out, Ann gave him the least bend of her head, as if she scarcely remembered him; his image had been already swept from her mind. He was dashed; he dropped his hand. He felt a strong desire to go with them, wherever it was. But he had not been invited: Ashton had. He was following in their wake.

"What a toady!" he thought to himself with a bitterness that surprised him. It was odd how jealous he felt for a moment. They were all "going on," it seemed. He hung about a little awkwardly. Only the old fogies were left—no, even the great man was going on, it seemed. Only the old lady was left. She was hobbling across the room on Lasswade's arm. She wanted to confirm something that she had been saying to her nephew about a miniature. They were examining it; Lasswade had taken it off the wall and was holding it under a lamp so that she could pronounce her verdict. Was it Granpapa on the cob, or Uncle William?

"Sit down, Martin, and let us talk," said Kitty. He sat down: but he had a feeling that she wanted him to go. He had seen her glance at the clock. They chatted for a moment. But now the old lady came back; she was proving, beyond a doubt, from her unexampled store of anecdotes, that it must be Uncle William on the cob and not Lord Charles. She was going. Not that she ever slept till four in the morning, she assured them. Still she was going, and Martin stood about till she was fairly in the doorway, leaning on her nephew's arm. He hesitated; they were alone now; should he stay, or should he go? But Kitty was standing up. She was holding out her hand.

"Come again soon and see me alone," she said. She had dismissed him, he felt.

That's what people always say, he said to himself as he made his way slowly downstairs behind Lady Warburton. Come again: but I don't know that I shall. . . . Lady Warburton went downstairs like a crab, holding on to the banisters with one hand, to Lasswade's arm with the other. He lingered behind her. He looked at the Canaletto once more. A nice picture: but a copy, he said to himself. He peered over the banisters and saw the black-and-white slabs on the hall beneath.

It did work, he said to himself, descending step by step into the hall. Off and on; by fits and starts. Anyhow, it's something to talk about, he thought, letting the footman help him into his coat. He wound his muffler round his neck. The double doors stood wide open into the street. One or two people were passing, and they peered in curiously, looking at the footmen, at the bright, big hall; at the old lady who was being helped into her carriage.

The eighteenth century going to bed, Martin said to himself as he watched the footman—she still used horses—wrapping the rug round her knees. Then he shook hands with that good fellow his host, who had had quite as much wine as was good for him, and walked off through Grosvenor Square.

Kitty stood for a moment alone in her drawing-room. She was waiting for Martin to be gone. She walked to the door and listened. The coast was clear. She began slipping off her rings as she hurried upstairs and along the passage to her bedroom. But everything was ready for her. Baxter, her maid, was standing at her dressing-table waiting.

"Sorry to be so late, Baxter," she said. "Now I must hurry."

Baxter, without speaking, unhooked her dress; slipped it dexterously to her feet, and bore it away. Kitty sat down at her dressing-table and kicked off her shoes. She glanced at the clock on her dressing-table as she pulled her stockings down. In fact, she had plenty of time; the drawing-room clock was always fast. Everything was to hand as she needed it. She hoped, as she changed into her outdoor things, that she had not given Martin too much of a hint that she wished him to go. She would ask him another time when she was alone.

Baxter was handing her coat. Now she was handing her bag.

"The ticket's in there, m'lady," she said, touching the bag.

"Now my hat," said Kitty. Baxter had two hats ready for her to choose from. She took the one she wanted. She stooped to settle it in front of the mirror. She glanced at her side face. The little tweed travelling-hat poised on the top of her hair made her look quite a different person; now she was becoming the sort of person she liked being. She stood in her travelling-dress, in her country clothes, wondering if she had forgotten anything. Her mind was a perfect blank for a moment. She could not think where she was going or what she was doing. Her eyes fixed themselves on the dressing-table with its equipment of little silver boxes and powder puffs. Was she at home, at Oxford? she wondered.

"The ticket, Baxter?" she said perfunctorily.

"In your bag, m'lady," Baxter reminded her. She

was holding it in her hand.

"So that's everything," said Kitty, glancing round her. The bed was scattered with her evening clothes. Baxter was picking up the stockings that she had dropped on the floor; she was rolling them up into little neat balls. Then she took the dress and carried it to the wardrobe. Kitty felt a moment's compunction at the number of things she had left strewn about. Still, Baxter was having a day off tomorrow.

"Thanks, Baxter," she said. "I hope you'll enjoy your . . ."—she hesitated: she did not know what Baxter did on her day off—" . . . your play," she said at a venture. Baxter gave a queer little bitten-off smile. Maids bothered Kitty with their demure politeness; with their inscrutable, pursed-up faces. But they were very useful.

"Good-night!" she said to Baxter at the door of the bedroom; for there Baxter turned back as if her responsibility for her mistress ended. Somebody else had charge of the stairs.

Kitty looked in at the drawing-room, in case her husband should be there. But the room was empty. The fire was still blazing; the chairs, drawn out in a circle, still seemed to hold the skeleton of the party in their empty arms. But the car was waiting for her at the door.

"Plenty of time?" she said to the chauffeur as he laid the rug across her knees. He touched his hat. The servility of town servants irritated her. Why can't he be like Cole? she thought. Country servants are so much nicer.

It was a clear still night and every tree in the square was visible; some were black, and others were sprinkled with strange patches of green artificial light. Above the arc lamps rose shafts of darkness. Although it was close on midnight, it scarcely seemed to be night; but rather some aetherial disembodied day, for there were so many lamps in the streets; cars passing; men in white mufflers with their light overcoats open walking along the clean dry pavements. Many houses were still lit up; the season was beginning; everyone was giving parties. But the town changed as they drew silently and smoothly through Mayfair. She was conscious of shuttered shops; of black furtive figures edging along near the wall. The public-houses were closing; here was a group clustered round a lamp-post at the corner. A drunken man was bawling out some loud song; a tipsy girl with a feather bobbing in her eyes was swaying as she clung to the lamp-post . . . but her eyes alone registered what she saw. After the talk, the effort and the hurry, she could add nothing to what she saw. And they swept on quickly. Now they had turned, and the car was gliding at full speed up a long bright avenue of great shuttered shops. The streets were almost empty. The yellow station clock showed that they had five minutes to spare.

The chauffeur took her bag, and she walked ahead of him through the booking-hall out onto the platform. The usual exhilaration mounted in her as she came out into the solemn, echoing place. Diffused light poured down from a great height. Men's cries and the clangour of shunting carriages echoed in the immense vacancy. The train was waiting; travellers were making ready to start. Some were standing with one foot on the step of the carriage drinking out of thick cups as if they

were afraid to go far from their seats. She looked down the length of the long train and saw the engine sucking water from a hose. It seemed all body, all muscle; even the neck had been consumed into the smooth barrel of the body. This was "the" train; the others, with their high funnels and bottle-green bodies, were toys in comparison. She snuffed the sulphurous air, which left a slight tinge of acid at the back of the throat as if it already had a tang of the north.

The guard had seen her and was coming towards her with his whistle in his hand. As he touched his hat and unlocked the door of her carriage, she felt that he would have kept the whole train waiting if she had been late.

"Good evening, m'lady," he said.

"Good evening, Purvis. Run it rather fine," she said.

"Yes, m'lady. Only just in time," he replied.

The chauffeur settled her bag on the seat; touched his hat; and receded as if his responsibility were now over too. The guard locked the door. Kitty turned and looked round the small lighted room in which she was to spend the night. Everything was ready; the bed was made; the sheets were turned down; her bag was on the seat. The guard passed the window, holding his flag in his hand. A man who had only just caught the train ran across the platform with his arms spread out. A door slammed.

"Just in time," Kitty said to herself as she stood there. Then the train gave a gentle tug. She could hardly believe that so great a monster could start so gently on so long a journey. Then she saw the tea-urn sliding past.

"We're off," she said to herself, sinking back onto the seat. "We're off!"

All the tension went out of her body. She was alone; and the train was moving. The last lamp on the platform slid away. The last figure on the platform vanished.

"What fun!" she said to herself, as if she were a little girl who had run away from her nurse and escaped. "We're off!" There she was in her little, brightly lit room alone.

She sat still for a moment; then she tugged the blind and it sprang up with a jerk. Elongated lights slid past; lights of factories and warehouses; lights in obscure back streets. Then there were asphalt paths; more lights of public gardens; and the bushes and a hedge in a field. They were leaving London behind them; leaving that blaze of light which seemed, as the train rushed into the darkness, to contract itself into one fiery circle. The train rushed with a roar through a tunnel. It seemed to perform an act of amputation; now she was cut off from that blazing fire.

She looked round the narrow little compartment in which she was isolated. Everything shook slightly. There was a perpetual faint vibration. She seemed to be passing from one world to another, and this was the moment of transition. She sat still for a moment, uncertain where she was. Then she undressed and paused with her hand on the blind. The train had got into its stride now; it was rushing at full speed through the country. A few distant lights twinkled here and there. Black clumps of trees stood in the grey summer fields; the fields that were full of summer grasses. The light from the engine lit up a quiet group of cows. And there

was a hedge of hawthorn. They were in open country now.

She pulled down the blind and climbed into her bed. She laid herself out on the rather hard shelf with her back to the carriage wall, so that she felt a faint vibration against her head. She lay listening to the humming noise which the train made, now that it had got into its stride. Smoothly and powerfully she was being drawn through England to the north. I need do nothing, she thought, nothing, nothing, but let myself be drawn on. She turned and pulled down the shade. The sound of the train became louder in the darkness; its roar, its vibration, seemed to fall into a regular rhythm of sound, raking through her mind, rolling out her thoughts.

Ah, but not all of them, she thought, turning restlessly on her shelf. Some still jutted up. One's not a child, she thought, staring at the light under the blue shade, not a child again. The years changed things; destroyed things; heaped things up—worries and bothers; here they were again. Fragments of talk kept coming back to her; sights came before her. She saw herself raise the window with a jerk; and the bristles on Aunt Warburton's chin; the women rising as the men came in, like gulls, she said to herself; and the men, with their sport, with their politics, all saying the same thing. And Margaret Marrable pinched the dress up between her fingers. All their clothes are the same, she thought; all their lives are the same. And which is right? she thought, turning restlessly on her shelf. Mine, theirs, whose? Which is wrong? She turned again.

The train rushed her on. The sound had deepened; it had become a continuous roar. But she felt that she would never get to sleep; she would go on seeing this, seeing that, repeating this, repeating that—unless she refused to think any more. She looked at the light. How where are we? she said to herself. Now, where is the train at this moment? Now, she said to herself, shutting her eyes, we are passing the white house on the hill; now we are going through the tunnel; now we are crossing the bridge over the river. A blank intervened; her thoughts became oddly spaced; one was at a great distance from another; and then they all became mixed together. She saw Aunt Warburton quite distinctly; but she was leading a bull with a ring through its nose. . . . This is sleep, she said to herself, half opening her eyes; thank goodness, she said, shutting them again, this is sleep, and she resigned herself to the charge of the train, whose roar now became dulled and distant.

There was a tap at her door. She lay for a moment, wondering why the room shook so; then the scene settled itself; she was in the train; she was in the country; they had brought her tea; they were nearing the station. She got up. She dressed rapidly and stood in the corridor. It was still early. She watched the fields galloping past. They were the bare fields, the angular fields of the north. The spring was late here; the trees were not fully out yet. The smoke looped down and caught a tree in its white cloud. When it lifted, she thought, how fine the light was; clear and sharp, white, grey. The land had none of the softness, none of the greenness of the land in the south. But

here was the junction; here was the gasometer; they were running into the station. The train slowed down and all the lamp-posts on the platform gradually came to a standstill.

She got out and drew in a deep breath of the cold raw air. She followed the porter to her car; but Cole, the chauffeur, was doing something to his engine and did not see her.

"Won't she start, Cole?" she said. He touched his cap and shook his head. The veins on his forehead were standing out; it was a new car, and he was annoyed that it would not start. Again he swung the handle round and round; still it would not start. The process was repeated. At last he hopped in and—very slowly, for the engine seemed to beat intermittently, starting and stopping and then starting again—they moved off. Cole's face relaxed, and he turned to her with a smile.

"She'd got cold waiting, m'lady," he said.

She pulled the rug over her knees; it was she who had insisted that the car should be open.

"Much colder than in London," she said. She turned up the collar of her coat and breathed in the sharp north-country air. They drove through the town; all the shops were still shut; women were on their knees scrubbing doorsteps; blinds were still drawn in bedrooms and sitting-rooms; there was very little traffic about. Only milk-carts rattled past. Dogs roamed down the middle of the street on private errands of their own. Cole had to hoot again and again.

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"I'm not pressing her," said Cole, lifting his foot to show how lightly it touched the accelerator. Then he touched it again and the car sped on. They were driving a little too fast, Kitty thought; she was always nervous unless she drove herself; but the road—she kept her eye on it—was still empty. Only two or three lumbering farm waggons passed them; the men went to the horses' heads and held them as they went by. The road stretched pearl-white in front of them; the hedges were decked with the little pointed leaves of early spring.

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"The wind's very cold," he said, but he was thinking of his engine. He has none of the servile ways of the London flunkey, she thought; she was at her ease with him. The air seemed to have different grades of warmth and chill in it; now sweet; now—they were passing a farmyard—strong-smelling, acrid from the sour smell of manure. She leant back, holding her hat to her head. "You won't get her up this on top, Cole," she said, as the pace slackened a little and she saw before her the familiar Dodds hill, with the yellow streaks where carters had put on their brakes. In the old days, when she drove horses, they used to get out here and walk. Cole said nothing. He was going to show off his engine, she suspected. The car swept up finely. But the hill was long; there was a level stretch; then the road mounted again. It was hard on the engine; the car faltered. Cole coaxed her on. Kitty saw him jerk his body slightly backwards and forwards as if he were

encouraging a horse. She almost expected him to make a cluck at the back of his throat. She felt the tension of his muscles, as if he were doing his best to help the engine on. They slowed—they almost stopped. No, now they were on the crest of the hill. She had done it on top!

"Well done!" she exclaimed. He said nothing; but he was very proud, she knew.

"We couldn't have done that on the old car," she said.

"Ah, but it wasn't her fault!" said Cole.

He was a very humane man, she reflected; the kind of man she liked. She relaxed now, for the road was clear ahead, she could look about her.

"So that house is let at last?" she said as they passed a low grey stone house behind a gate. Ill-kept bushes grew right up to the front door. For fifty years an eccentric lady had lived there, alone with peacocks and bloodhounds; issuing out only at dusk and heavily veiled. But the postman was now delivering letters. A solicitor from York had taken it, Cole said, a man of the name of Rudge. They sped on. Now the woods were on their right hand and the air came singing through them. It sounded like the sea, Kitty thought, looking as they passed, down a dark green drive patched with yellow sunlight. They sped on. Heaps of ruddy brown leaves lay by the roadside staining the puddles red.

"It's been raining?" she said. He nodded. Spring comes very slowly, she thought; but when it came, it was real: it was spring truly. They came out on the high ridge with the woods beneath, and there, in a clearing among the trees, there was a green-grey roof; a clock tower; and the spark of a glasshouse. It was the first sight of the Castle. She always looked out for it and greeted it as if she were raising her hand to a friend. Now they were on their own land. Gate-posts were branded with their initials; their arms hung above the signboard of the inns; their crest was mounted over cottage doors. Cole looked at the clock.

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"She did it beautifully, Cole," she said. "I'll tell his Lordship."

"It's only the starting she's slow at," said Cole, much gratified.

Kitty took her bag and carried it in. Nobody was about; they had arrived earlier than was expected. The house was shut up until the summer. She crossed the great stone-flagged hall, with the armour and the busts, and went into the morning room where breakfast

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would be laid. The windows opened onto the terrace, and the green light dazzled her as she went in, as if she stood in the hollow of an emerald. All was green outside. She flung open the windows. The statues of grey French ladies stood along the terrace, holding their baskets; but the baskets were empty; in summer they would be full of flowers. The green turf fell down in broad swathes between beds marked with clipped yews; then it dipped to the river, and then rose again to the hill that was crested with woods. There was a curl of mist on the woods now. As she gazed at the familiar view, a bee buzzed past her ear; she thought she could hear the murmur of the river over the stones; the pigeons were crooning in the tree-tops—but the door opened behind her.

"Morning, Lizzie," she said, turning round. There was Lizzie.

"I didn't hear your Ladyship come," said Mrs Cole: she was bringing in the breakfast things. Kitty watched her putting down the dishes.

"It was the new car," she said. She was very hungry; there were eggs and sausages, scones and coffee. "Cole drives too fast," she said. She helped herself liberally. "That's what I call a breakfast," she said, sitting down.

When she had done she lay back in her chair; she felt warm, stored and comfortable. She had the whole day before her; a day in which she need speak to nobody. It was fine too. The sunlight suddenly quickened in the room and laid a broad bar of light across the floor. A tortoiseshell butterfly flitted across the window; she saw it settle on a leaf.

But you won't find much to eat on that, she said, watching it. There it sat. The wings opened and shut; opened and shut, as if it feasted on the sunlight. There was red down on its body as if it were newly hatched. She watched it. Off it flitted again. Then the chow walked in, admitted by an invisible hand, came straight up to her, sniffed at her skirt and flung himself down in a bright patch of sunlight.

"Heartless brute!" she said, but his indifference pleased her. I hate little dogs that want to be made a fuss of, she thought, stretching her hand for a cigarette. There was a box on the table; a solid box, made of enamel. A birthday present. As she opened it the enamel changed from blue to green, from green to blue. And Martin, she thought, as she lit her cigarette, what would he say to that? Hideous? vulgar?—but his criticism seemed much less weighty this morning. She wafted it away from her as she smoked. And what's wrong with the room? she thought. She looked round at the chairs and tables. They seemed to her all right; they seemed to her exactly what she liked—except that Lizzie always stood ornaments askew. "Always askew," she said, straightening a silver frame. To show it's not used, I suppose, she thought. That's why their kitchens are so nice and their parlours are so hideous. And that picture, she thought, looking at a still life over the mantelpiece; what would Martin say to that? She liked it herself. But what did it matter what he said, what she said, what anybody said, since she had a whole day to herself? She need talk to nobody. She threw away her cigarette and began undoing a hook or two. She would go upstairs and change into her very

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oldest clothes now—then she would spend the day alone out of doors.

The sun was much stronger when she came downstairs half an hour later. The garden had already lost its look of purity; the mist was off the woods. She could hear the squeak of the lawn-mower round the corner as she stepped out of the window. The rubber-shod pony, she knew, was pacing up and down the lawns, leaving a pale wake in the grass behind him. The birds were singing loudly in their scattered way. The starlings in their bright mail were feeding on the grass. It was a perfect May morning. And think of them in London, she thought, as she stood on the terrace; the bee hummed in her ear: think of them still in bed after their parties. The thought gave her satisfaction—they were asleep; she was up and out. She had a whole day before her and need speak to nobody.

She walked down the terrace in her thick shoes, with her sandwiches in her pocket, and picked a leaf of verbena and crushed it as she passed. She glanced in at the windows of the library. Everything was shrouded and shut up; but the long room looked more than usually stately and well proportioned, and the brown books behind their wire netting seemed to exist with dignity in silence: silently, by themselves, for themselves. She left the house and walked down a long grass path. The gardens were still empty save for a man in shirt-sleeves doing something to a tree. But she did not want to speak to anyone, and she passed him on the other side. The chow stalked after her; when he was bored he would leave her, she knew. She walked on past the flower-beds to the river. There she always stopped, on the grey stone bridge, with the cannon-balls at intervals. The water fascinated her. The quick northern river came down from the moors, red, yellow and clear brown as it splayed itself over the pebbles on the bed. It was never smooth and green like southern rivers; it raced, it hurried. Resting her elbows on one of the stone balls, she watched it eddying round the arches, making streaks, diamonds and sharp arrow shapes over the stones. She knew the different sounds it made, in summer and winter, when it was full, when it was low. Now it hurried and raced.

But the chow was bored. He marched on. She followed him. She went up the green ride towards the snuffer-shaped monument between the trees, which the wicked earl had built; the earl who had wished to be buried there beside his mistress. Every path through the woods had its name. There was the Keepers' Path; Lovers' Walk, Ladies' Mile, the Earl's Ride which led past the ruined house where, two hundred years ago, he had kept his lover. Before she entered the woods she turned and looked back at the house. This was the view she liked best; times out of number she had stopped here. The ugly Victorian wing was hidden; the castle looked grey and stately; asleep this morning with the blinds drawn, and no flag on the flagstaff. Then she turned into the woods.

The wind seemed to rise as she walked under the trees. It sighed in their tops; but it was silent beneath. The dead leaves crackled under her feet; among them sprang up the pale spring flowers, the loveliest of the year. Spring was sad always, she thought. All passes, she thought, as she climbed up the little path between the trees. Nothing of this belonged to her; her son would inherit. His wife would walk here after her. She broke off a little twig; she picked a flower and put

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it to her lips. Of all passion, this for the country was her deepest. It was her self, in some way; this earth, these roots. She strode on. The ground rose steeply. Her muscles felt strong and flexible as she pressed her thick-soled shoes to the ground. She was still in the prime of life; still young; still vigorous. She threw away her flower. The trees thinned as she climbed higher and higher.

Suddenly she saw the sky between two striped tree-trunks, extraordinarily blue. Then she came out on the rough turf by the monument which the old earl had built; the mark for ships at sea. The wind ceased, and the country opened wide all round her. Her body seemed to shrink and to become all eye. She threw herself on the ground and looked over the billowing land that went, rising and falling, away and away till somewhere far off it reached the sea. It was an uncultivated land, seen from this height, an uninhabited land, existing by itself, for itself. Dark wedges of shadow, bright breadths of light, lay side by side. Then as she watched, light moved and dark moved; and light and shadow went travelling over the hills and over the valleys. Yellow, blue, red and deep violet the land changed as the light and shadow passed over it. It seemed transient yet everlasting. Whoever comes, she thought, whether I see it or don't see it, there it is; and these little bright flowers, she thought, holding one of the little moor flowers between her thumb and finger.

"STEP up, step up," Crosby grumbled at the two gaping children who were gazing at the soldiers. A company of young men in khaki were marching down Richmond High Street. A drum beat a regular tick, tick, tick. They marched in time to it with their collars undone and their faces red and shiny after the march.

It was very warm. The sultry September sunshine lay in broad stretches across the pavement. Crosby in her respectable black was glad to reach the shade thrown by an awning over a shop. She was taking Mrs Burt's two grandchildren, Alf and Gladys, for a walk in Kew Gardens after tea. She was always ready to oblige Louisa—and in fact liked the task; it gave her a sense of her own importance. "Step up," she repeated, "step up," and the children trotted on. The soldiers marched away. Now she reached out and caught Alf in one hand and Gladys in the other, for there was a bad crossing in front of them. The street outside the station was crowded. A train had come in, and people were hurrying up the steps from the station and streaming across the road with newspapers crumpled in their hands. Newspaper boys, with fresh bales of newspapers under their arms, were beginning to scatter through the streets crying the latest news.

Crosby kept her hand on the children's shoulders until it was safe to cross.

"Now—" she said, making the great decision; they all scuttled over in a body. Now they were safe on the long stretch of road that led without crossings to the gate at Kew. Her legs pained her, so that her walk, as she hobbled along, resembled the flutter of a steadfast but uneasy hen. The children, however, could be trusted to walk alone. Sometimes one or the other gave a little caper, or lagged annoyingly, but for the most part they walked obediently, hand in hand, with their toys pressed close to their sides just ahead of her. At their age, Crosby thought, Martin and Rose would have been up to all sorts of tricks. She could see Martin now, holding a bottle of milk above his head and bringing it down with a smash on the pavement outside the Park. "Out of sheer devilry," she said to herself. "And I had to laugh," she added, shaking her old head, wrinkling her old cheeks at the memory. But Alf and Gladys were sober, straight-haired children, with no spirit in them, she thought, as they trudged on along the dusty road just ahead of her.

When they reached the gardens Crosby hobbled off to her usual seat under the tree near the gate, for her legs pained her; she was too tired to walk further. She sat down and looked about, resting her eyes vaguely on the blazing beds of autumn flowers. Then she took out her sewing and began stitching at the white calico nightgown she was making. Her needle pricked along the hem with a sound like a mouse nibbling. Every now and then she looked up over her spectacles to see that the children were not in mischief. No; they were playing on the grass. Her eye rested once more vaguely, like an insect sunning itself, on the red and yellow flowers. Then she bent over her sewing again; she made a little noise like tu-tut-tut as her needle pricked through the stiff white stuff.

But though it was a fine evening, the breeze was

freshening; now and then a gold-spotted leaf came spiralling to the grass at her feet; her ankles felt chilly. Then the children began to worry her. They kept coming up and laying their toys on her knees, and asking what they were to play at next. They wanted to go to the lake, they said; Alf wanted to sail his boat. She stitched on imperviously until she had finished her hem. Then she rolled up her sewing.

"Come along, then," she said, putting her things in her bag. "And then we must go home," she added, checking her indulgence as if by instinct.

The little covey moved off in the direction of the lake. The gardens were rather full. Family parties were straying down the broad grass walks, middle-aged women for the most part, who sauntered, and chatted episodically, keeping one eye on the children. Some parties had brought their tea with them; there were rugs on the grass, spread with cups and bottles of milk. But it was getting late, and the mothers were putting the tea things away while the children played by the lake. The decorated water-birds, beautifully picked out with black and white, stepped stately among them. Alf and Gladys went cautiously hand in hand down to the water's edge. Alf stooped and launched his boat. Crosby looked about her for a seat in the sun but out of the wind. She would give them a quarter of an hour before she took them home.

There was a seat, but it was already occupied by an old man eating something out of a paper bag; by a woman knitting; and by a young man who sat beside her making notes in a little book. But there was room for her if they sat closer. They edged together, and she took her place at the end of the seat. Nobody spoke. The young man went on jotting down notes, and the young woman went on knitting. Crosby disliked the old man who was eating out of a paper bag—now he was scattering crumbs to the birds and the sparrows came fluttering round, hopping and pecking. But she liked the young married couple—the little boy in a green jersey who was playing about was their first child, she guessed. Then there was a cry from the water; one of the geese had run at Alf and pecked him.

"Don't meddle with them birds, Alf!" Crosby cried. "They'll hurt you!"

Alf desisted. The goose waddled off.

"They're dangerous, those birds," she said, turning to the young married couple. But they paid her no attention. The woman called to her child; at the same moment the young man got up, put his book in his pocket and walked off. Crosby was put out. She had been mistaken. They were not a married couple. They did not even know each other. She was annoyed at having spoken, since nobody bothered to answer her.

The young man walked away from the lake down the broad grass sweep rather slowly, for he was totting up figures in his head. He was a traveller in men's underwear, and he was making a rough total of his day's sales. On the whole he hadn't done so badly; business was still fairly brisk, considering. He lit a cigarette and glanced casually at the trees and flowers. They were a fine show certainly. Many people had stopped to look at them. Some of the flowers were as big as a man's head; all curled. But he knew nothing about flowers, and he had a train to catch. His pace

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quickened and he walked briskly through the gate, and down the street of villas that led to the station. He was a trained traveller; he had an instinct which told him if he walked fast, but not too fast, he would about catch his train.

He was right; the train came in as he arrived, and yet he had not hurried. He threw away his cigarette and swung himself on board. He found a seat too; but he had to hold his bag on his knee for the train was full of soldiers. They stood in a line down the middle of the carriage, hanging on to the straps, talking and joking as if they had been out all day taking exercise together. Their faces were red; the necks of their uniforms were open. The civilian passengers kept looking up at them surreptitiously over the edges of their newspapers. They looked at them admiringly; they smiled furtively at their chaff. There was a good deal to be said for their job, Bert Parker thought—glancing at them, over his order-book; then he wetted his finger and turned the flimsy page—compared with his one. But he hadn't done so badly, all things considered. He jotted down a figure at the bottom of the page. Now they were sliding into Hammersmith station. Most of the soldiers got out there; they jostled and chaffed each other as they tramped down the carriage clumsily with their sacks on their shoulders, obviously conscious of the admiring glances that were cast on them. Newspapers were now lowered.

"What a nice-looking set of young fellows!" an elderly lady murmured, looking over her shoulder at the soldiers who were now lining up on the platform, as the train started off. There was more room now. Bert Parker put his bag on the seat beside him. People unfolded their newspapers, spreading the sheets wide, so that "Three British Cruisers Sunk" was repeated again and again in large black letters on the front page of one newspaper after another. The newspapers were turned over, as if the readers were searching for more information. But they could find nothing more about the disasters, only items. The wife of a postman at Andover had been brought to bed of triplets; a basket of ripe strawberries had been picked at Sidmouth—that was all. They sat with their papers on their knees. The train had left the open, and was rattling through the tunnel. Now that the soldiers had gone there was no laughter or chaffing; the passengers stared at each other, or looked at their own reflections on the glass lined-tunnel.

The meagre white-haired old lady who had liked the look of the soldiers, had no paper and she screwed up her eyes and tried to read the headline on the man's paper who sat beside her. But she was short-sighted. He looked like a gentleman, however—he had a ring on his finger and he wore a grey suit—so that she plucked up courage to say to him, rather nervously, as the train ran into the station.

"If you've done with your paper, might I . . ."

He gave it her with a little jerk, and sat staring ahead of him. He had, she noticed, rather fierce blue eyes. Now that she had taken his paper he sat staring at the people in front of him. Since all movement or action was impossible, they were all staring in front of them. There was something in the passive and stolid appearance of the other passengers that seemed to annoy him. He kept crossing and uncrossing his legs. He looked quickly up and down the row of faces. Nobody moved.

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Nobody spoke. Since there were five more stations to be passed before he reached his station, and since each station took two minutes to reach, he must sit there for ten minutes longer. The train rattled and banged. Whenever he found himself shut up somewhere without anything to do, words seemed to come together in his head. His lips moved. What for, what for, what for, the train seemed to be growling as it rattled through South Kensington station. He looked at the respectable ladies in their drab hats and coats; he looked at a young man with a note-book puffing rings of smoke through his nose; he looked at a corpulent red-faced man with a heavy silver chain across his waistcoat. They were all of the respectable classes, save for a flower-woman with a basket at the door. Her naked arms were folded across her breast; a broad gold wedding ring was sunk into the fat of her fingers; and the feather in her bonnet jerked ridiculously as the train shook. Nobody moved or spoke. Everybody seemed to be gloating; to have fed on the garbage in the newspapers; and to be passively chewing the cud. He felt that if this went on he must get up and cry out. Suddenly he caught the reflection of his own face on the glass-lined wall opposite. He saw a red-faced man with a grey moustache staring back at him, quite indistinguishable from the others.

"Thanks so much," said the old lady, politely returning his newspaper. He grasped it in his fist as the train swept into the whiteness of the station. It was not his station, but he could sit there no longer looking at his own reflection in the glass. He got up and tried to push his way out between the slowly-moving bodies of his fellow passengers. But they moved with extreme slowness; he had to mark time behind them. People outside were pressing to get in. The conductor gave his automatic shout, "Passengers off first please!" as he warded off the new-comers. At last the man with the grey moustache forced his way out. Then the new passengers crowded in and took the places that had been left empty.

A girl in evening dress sat down on top of the newspaper that he had left in his seat. A young officer in uniform stood up in front of her holding on to the strap. The elderly lady who had borrowed the newspaper looked sidelong at them, smiling slightly; she strained her head on one side to catch what they said. "What a rush we had getting off!" the girl said, looking up at the officer. There was no need that she should say it; but she felt that people wanted to hear her speak. A vague sympathy, a dumb admiration, surrounded them wherever they went. She had to say something. They're having a last night together before he goes to the Front, the old lady thought, straining to hear what the fine young fellow in uniform was saying. But he hardly spoke. His hand went mechanically to his chin; little clipped words seemed to issue from his firm red lips. The old woman strained to catch what it was he said.

"Good," he said. "Good. Good," he repeated curtly, shortly. He seemed to be trained to stand stiffly and to speak shortly. She admired it very much. An officer, going to the Front, she thought.

The train ran into Piccadilly Circus. They rose and went out. Eyes glanced appreciatively after them, as the girl went first and the officer followed protectively behind her. The old lady looked over her shoulder

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after them as they walked along the platform. They are going to the play, she told herself. Perhaps it's their last night together, she thought. Sad as the thought was, there was a sweetness in it which gave her a thrill of something like pleasure. But here the train stopped at Leicester Square, and she fluttered out onto the platform. It would have been a relief to her if somebody had asked her to help them; she looked along the platform in case any one wanted to be directed for instance to the Hampstead tube; but nobody wanted to be helped, and the liftman clanged the door in her face as she reached the gate.

Dear, dear, she said as she stood in the draught. How provoking! Now I shall keep her waiting. The draught swirled the skirts round her thin legs. But thousands of young men, she thought, are standing in the rain; thousands are lying wounded, she thought, clapping her hands to her skirts. Here the lift opened its door and she hurried in. I'm afraid I'm late, she thought, and perhaps she'll have gone in. Perhaps it had been foolish to tell her to get the tickets; it might have been better for each to have got her own ticket separately. Her sense of inefficiency, her usual little worries returned to her, as she hurried out into Leicester Square.

For a moment she was bewildered, for she had lost her sense of direction. The streets were glaring with light. Advertisements were popping in and out. The names of the theatres were framed in blue and red lines; there was a bottle of beer that poured and stopped, then poured again. The sky glared as if a red and yellow canopy hung down over it. Uncertain of her way, she trotted a few steps towards Trafalgar Square. Birds were making a high shrill squealing in the air. No, that was wrong. She stopped. It must be the other way. Of course . . . there was the Coliseum with its globe on top of it. Long queues stood in the street, moving slowly as if they were being gradually swallowed by a snake. The people were moving on step by step. Some of them were eating bananas; others were reading newspapers; men were turning somersaults and playing horns; but the queue moved slowly; then stopped; then moved on again, as if the snake had swallowed another mouthful. Taxis were arriving; people in evening dress were jumping out even before the kerb was reached; they were pushing through the swing doors into the brightly-lit hall. Miriam Parrish hurried along; peering anxiously this way and that, and at last caught sight of a woman standing just within the door whom she recognised.

"Oh, Eleanor, my dear!" she exclaimed, "I'm afraid I've kept you waiting!"

"Nothing to matter," said Eleanor; and they took their seats just as the curtain rose.

Now that the rush was over, the streets emptied themselves and became quiet. It seemed, in the theatre quarter, that everybody had gone indoors. The plays had begun; the feast of entertainment was spread; everybody had taken their places. An occasional taxi drifted along; the omnibuses scarcely waited and swooped along quickly with only a handful of passengers in them. The starlings which had been making a shrill discordant chatter on the eaves of St. Martins Church and round the walls of the National Gallery

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ceased. Nelson's Column rose elongated, patched with yellow at the base; but as the night deepened the little figure and the coil of rope became dead black against the sky. Spangles, crescents of light, were reflected in the black water in the basins of Trafalgar Square. The moon was almost full, and within its radius the sky was clear and blue; but over the theatres it glared yellower and redder, and the signs, the advertisements, the bottles of beer that poured and stopped, the faces in the streets, became more and more clear-cut as the night deepened.

For an hour or two the neighbourhood had the air of a room that has been deserted; but just before eleven the rush of life began again. People poured out of the theatres; taxis wheeled circled and hooted; omnibuses drew up; were filled over and over again; and the streets were full of people in evening dress, or in their ordinary clothes, making their way to the tubes and the trains that were to take them home.

Eleanor and Miriam Parrish came out into the street together.

"I did enjoy that!" Miriam Parrish exclaimed. She gave Eleanor's arm a little squeeze as they stood for a moment in the crowd. "And I never guessed how it was going to end—did you?" she said.

"No," said Eleanor. "I never guessed. It took me quite by surprise." Until five minutes of the end, she had believed that the innocent man was the villain. She stood still for a moment; she was still under the influence of the play. She had to readjust all her ideas. She had been completely taken in.

"I suppose one ought to have guessed," she said, thinking of the plot. "But I didn't—no." They began to walk along the street. Miriam was going home by tube. They reached the station.

"How nice it's been, spending an evening together," she said, giving Eleanor's arm a little pinch. "Do let us meet again soon. Now where do you get your bus?"

She was beginning to fumble for her purse. "Oh, just down there," said Eleanor. "I shall walk," she added. "Good night, Miriam." She turned away. Miriam disappeared down the lift.

It was a fine night and the air was refreshing after the hot theatre. She liked walking after the play. She would walk before she took her omnibus. She crossed into Trafalgar Square. It looked vast and empty, scattered here and there with small black figures. It was odd, she thought, how completely she had been taken in; not until five minutes before the end had she realised—she began to go over the plot again. But a voice said behind her, "Ah, but it's not a time for picking and choosing. . . ." At first she thought the words were spoken to her. She looked round. Two middle-aged men of the professional class were passing her. She stopped for a moment to let them go by. They were talking about the War; she had forgotten the War; she had been absorbed in the play. She had a momentary feeling of guilt. How childish, she thought, moving on, to have been absorbed in a story, when—when what? She looked up at the sky. The moon was almost full; it was so clear that the craters showed on it like engravings on a beautifully polished silver coin.

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Not a cloud softened its sharp edges; the sky round it was dappled with yellow silver light. She looked at Cockspur Street lying in front of her.

There was nothing in particular to fix her eyes upon. Everything seemed much as usual. People were walking along, in couples, singly, rather quickly, as they did when it was late and they were anxious to get home. They were snapping up taxis; they were crowding into omnibuses. Yet somewhere—she glanced at the sky again—somewhere—she glanced at a great stone building—behind this, behind this—again she hesitated. Again she felt a feeling of guilt. There was something to see and she did not see it; something to feel and she did not feel it. She glanced back at the two men who had passed her. They were rapidly disappearing. They were feeling it, she thought, remembering their words—something about picking and choosing, while she had been absorbed in the play. But everything seemed much as usual. The air blew fresh on her face. She liked walking in London, at night especially, when the outlines of buildings showed; the detail that distracted one by day was lost; and it became larger and more dignified. She walked up the Haymarket, admiring the curve of the street. The dignity of the street, clear blue and spacious, made her remember, as she walked, how she had sat on a terrace, looking at hills. And the maid came out on the terrace, she thought, and said, Soldiers are guarding the line with fixed bayonets! There it was, sure enough; the familiar feeling. She sighed. And I said to myself, Not if I can help it, she thought, recalling the emotion with which, putting down her coffee-cup, she had looked at the hills fading into darkness, and had thought . . . some absurd thought about England: England in danger.

An omnibus stopped beside her. She had meant to walk; but she felt a sudden disinclination to walk by herself. It would be better to be with other people, she thought. Other people, she thought, getting into the omnibus, stop one from thinking. They're a help. . . . She sat down. She looked round the omnibus as she settled herself. It was almost full. All the other passengers looked sleepy, surly and rather tired after their night's outing. There was the usual City clerk and his young lady; the usual woman with a child on her knee; the usual nondescript elderly ladies who always puzzled her, since it was difficult to guess how they lived . . . but the conductor was collecting fares. He too looked surly. He was collecting coppers, taking them without a word. Now he had taken them, he stood in the door checking figures on a sheet. Nobody spoke; nobody moved. She glanced out of the window at the long line of shops on either side, the expensive shops in Piccadilly; that were all, at this hour of the night, shuttered, blank. There was very little traffic. At this hour of the night the omnibuses scarcely stopped; she saw a couple raise their hands; but the driver ignored them. The omnibus rushed on, swaying from side to side, as it took the long stretch of empty road at full speed.

"Papa's club," she said, looking up at the large building which she had passed so often.

The omnibus was so well-lit that she could have read, if she had anything to read. But she had nothing to read except the programme which she held in her hand. And the omnibus shook too much. They swept on. Here was Hyde Park Corner. She looked at the

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yellow clock in the little house at the corner. At this rate, she thought, I shall be home in no time. She glanced at the faces again. The conductor was leaning against the stairs, staring blankly in front of him. The woman holding the child on her knee had put her ticket in her mouth. Why take a child of that age out at this time of night? Eleanor asked herself, and she began to make up a little story to account for it—perhaps she had been visiting her husband, who was wounded, in one of the City hospitals—when the bus stopped with a jerk; the woman got up and lurched, carrying the child, down the gangway out onto the pavement. She set the child on its feet; and the bus swooped on. Perhaps she was a caretaker, Eleanor thought, trying to go on with her story: but late at night when people were too tired to talk, the little stories that one made up in omnibuses were unsatisfactory. Everyone seemed numbed and torpid. The girl was dropping off to sleep with her head on her young man's shoulder. She opened her eyes when it swerved.

We're going much too fast, Eleanor thought, as they cut round corners and swooped round lamp-posts. At this time of night the bus travelled at an enormous speed. Here they stopped again. More people got out. The conductor scarcely allowed them time to get off before he touched the bell. Now she was the only person left. The conductor leant with his back to the stairs and half shut his eyes. The light seemed brighter in this emptiness. She was rattled about like a pea in a bladder, since there was nobody on either side of her. She edged up so as to sit in the corner.

When it stops I shall get off, she said to herself. She looked over her shoulder to see where they had got to. I shall get off when we come to the public-house, she decided. There were the lamps glaring, there were the claret- and buff-painted walls of the public-house. She got up and jumped off quickly. Almost before she had found her feet the bus had started again.

"They don't give one much time," she said angrily, looking after the disappearing omnibus. But it was a relief to be on her own feet again; it was a relief to feel the fresh air on her face, and out here in this suburb, the night, without statues or advertisements, without theatres, without the stare of faces under arc lamps, was almost the natural night: the night itself. The streets were deserted.

The long avenue curved before her with one silhouette. The houses were all small middle-class villas with little front gardens, bow-windows jutting out, and a flight of steps that ran up to the hall door. All looked equally demure as she passed them; blind and safely curtained for the night. People kept early hours out here; the husbands had to go early to the City in the morning. Now and then a tree broke the monotony of the line; its shadows flickered on the pavement. Leaves hung separate, for some had fallen; there was a faint smell of the autumnal earth. Not a single figure appeared in the whole length of the avenue. Only cats were about, slinking silently close to the wall. The soft green light in their eyes glowed at her for a second; and then became suddenly extinct. She heard her own footsteps tap on the pavement.

She had some way to walk before she saw the vast block of flats in which she lived rising at the corner. A company had pulled down half a street and built

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them for "middle-class people of limited incomes," There was no lift; otherwise, as the advertisement put it, they were "replete with every modern convenience"; and cheap, certainly. She rehearsed these advantages often as she came in sight of her home. And then there's the magnificent view, she always added; I like being right on top. Here she looked up to the three windows on the very top next the roof.

Everybody else was already in, she noticed as she let herself in and looked at the board in the hall. In. In. In. In. The Smiths, the Jenkinsons, the Beards, the Ropers; the whole lot of them were in. They always were at this time of night. She had to climb high up on top of them to get to her own flat. She had six flights of stone steps to climb before she reached her door. But what a pleasure it still was, she thought, as she toiled up and up, to come and go as one liked; to feel that there was nobody—here she fitted her key in her lock—sitting up for her. Her milk was standing outside; the newspaper was pushed through the letter-box; and when she went in, letters were scattered in a fan shape in the hall.

She still enjoyed the ease and rapidity of the "modern conveniences." She touched a knob, and the sitting-room was lit. She lit a match and the gas fire was burning. There was her breakfast tray on the kitchen table; and she had only to light the gas ring and the kettle would be boiling in five minutes. Warmth, light, comfort, sprang into being at a touch.

She still felt, when she came into her sitting-room, a sense of being very high up. After living for so many years on the ground floor at Abercorn Terrace, she felt here high up, airy, exalted. The curtains had not been drawn, and she looked for a moment at London lying beneath her. She looked down upon innumerable roofs, sloping, shining on one side, dark on the other. Then there were the odd squares and divisions made by walls; here and there a high building rose with a streak of yellow light on it; and by day one could see a blue line of hill in the distance which she always called "the Surrey hills." That was now invisible. But tonight there was an extraordinary expanse of sky; the moon was shining; there was a look of gaiety in the sky, which was spread with that look of dappled iridescence that comes sometimes when the moon is full. Below was the yellow light that never ceased, the glare of London.

She sat down to warm herself while the kettle boiled. The little white skulls in the fire were already dark red. The heat stole over her hands and face. She sat for a moment spreading her hands in it. Then she took the pack of letters from the table and began shuffling through them. None looked interesting; except Crosby's, for Crosby, she thought, opening the cheap envelope, always writes as if she were talking; without stops; capital letters at odd intervals; a volley of sound, as if she were talking . . . but there was a hissing in the kitchen. The kettle was boiling over. She went into the kitchen; made her tea and came back holding the cup in her hand.

The evening paper which she had thrown on the table caught her eye. Three British cruisers sunk—she had read that on all the posters already. She supposed she must look and see if the list were out of what Mrs Robins, her char, called "casualties." "Casualties, casualties," she murmured as she spread the paper on

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her knee. There were some names in the stop-press news; but none that meant anything to her until she came to the name Rankin.

That can't be the man I met at Morris's in the summer? she asked. She tried to remember. He had been a sailor. His Christian name—what was it? Lionel, she thought. This man was Lionel. She looked up. Captain Rankin; a nice ordinary man who had taught them how to make knots.

"Aren't sailors charming people?" Celia had said as he opened the door for them. "And they dance so beautifully." They had been going up to bed. She looked down at the paper again. It must be him, she supposed. For a second she felt a wish to put out her hand and stop him as he opened the drawing-room door. But how could I have stopped him? she asked herself. She had not stopped him. She saw the gently swaying waves lifting him up and down as he lay helpless in the moonlight. And they had gone upstairs. A sense of futility came over her. But how could I have stopped him? she said aloud. It was absurd. She ran her eyes hastily over the other names in the newspaper, but she knew none of them. And the paper went on with little separate items: "... the wife of a postman at Andover was brought to bed of twins," she read. And a basket of strawberries . . . she threw the paper away. She sat there staring at the gas-fire; then she looked round her bright clean room. There was her mother's picture over the writing-table; and the cabinet full of china. She felt as if she were perched up, dry, isolated, in a high, safe place, overlooking the sea. But what's the use of thinking? she said to herself angrily, and began to open her letters. One was a demand for rates; another to say that Edward would lunch with her on Tuesday; another that a committee would meet on Thursday at four instead of Friday at two. She had better write it down while she remembered it. She went to her writing-table and crossed out one engagement and added the other. All the little compartments were becoming full. Every day in the week had its pencilled note. People were meeting. . . . And that was the day I meant to start for India, she thought, glancing at a certain Friday round which she had drawn a red ring. Then she stooped and turned out the gas; she waited till it made its little pop. The skulls began to fade. And the wife of the postman, she thought, glancing at the paper, has had triplets. It was odd—birth; destruction. She saw the three red faces under a flannel hood. The triplets seemed to throw a shaft of light into the future. She made a little calculation. If they were born yesterday, she thought, touching her fingers, in nineteen-twenty-four they'll be ten; in nineteen-thirty-four, twenty; in nineteen-forty-four—when I shall be dead, she thought, getting up. No: possibly I shall still be alive, she thought. I hope so, she added. She wanted to go on living. It was add.

She went into the bathroom. It gave her a thrill of pleasure. It was lined with gleaming white tiles; the taps shone silver; jars and brushes stood on a shining glass shelf. She lit the geyser; water instantly began to steam into the pure white bath. At Abercorn Terrace it always ran cold, she remembered. She began to undress. Yes, she thought as she slipped off her clothes, and hung them on a silver hook, this is luxury, a hot bath. And to think, she thought, taking the pins out of her hair, that if I'd had a quarter of a millionth part of

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that money—she saw Rigby Cottages again and the sunflower with a crack down the middle, I could have . . . But what's the use of thinking? she thought. The steam rose in a cloud; she turned on the cold tap. She waited for a moment for the water to be cool enough to get into. She was stark naked; the window had no blind. She stood looking at the dappled iridescence of the moon-lit sky, which seemed to make her bathroom whiter, cleaner, more dazzling in its purity than ever; and then she stepped in.

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"If that is the river," Eleanor said, pausing outside the station, "then Westminster must be over there."

It was a cold night and very dark. The further side of the street was almost invisible, because the lamps were shrouded in blue. It must be this way, she thought walking on, but with some hesitation; for though she knew this part of London very well, it was extraordinary what a difference darkness made. All the buildings, looming up without lights, looked vast and unfamiliar. Great spokes of light like the sails of a windmill moved across the sky; stopped; pondered; examined a fleecy patch of sky, and then swept on again. But they made the streets look more unfamiliar than ever.

She was dining with Renny and Maggie, and they lived in one of the rather obscure little streets under the shadow of the Abbey. It was always difficult to distinguish one from the other, even when the lamps were lit. She stopped again to take her bearings; there was the Abbey anyhow, but which street was this? She flashed her little pocket-torch onto a name on the wall. The huge bulk of the Abbey always seemed to brood over the streets here, making them even smaller and darker. Again she flashed her torch. Another name shone out. She peered her way along the street, turning her lamp onto door after door. Here she lit up a brick wall; here a dark-green tuft of ivy. All the windows were closely curtained. But at last the number she was looking for—number thirty—shone out. She knocked and rang at the same moment, for the darkness seemed to muffle sound as well as light. Silence seemed to weigh upon her as she stood waiting; there were very few people about.

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The door opened. She felt as if a weight were lifted, partly because a man's voice said "Come in!" partly because the sense of being in an enclosed place was so strange after the vast darkness of the empty streets. He shut the door behind him, quickly, as if to shut out the light. It all looked strange after the streets: the perambulator in the hall; the umbrellas in the stand; the carpet, the pictures: they all seemed intensified.

"Come in!" said Renny again, and led her into the sitting-room ablaze with light. Another man was standing in the room, and she was surprised because she had expected to find only Maggie. But she was not there; and the man was somebody she did not know.

For a moment they stared at each other; then Renny said, "You know Nicholas . . ." but he did not speak the surname distinctly, and it was so long that she could not catch it. A foreign name, she thought. He

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was clearly not English. He shook hands with a bow like a foreigner, and what was so foreign about him was that he went on talking. It was as if he were in the middle of a sentence that he wished to finish . . . something about . . . his temperature was always below normal and his pulse too . . . "we are talking about Napoleon . . ." he said, turning to her.

"I see," she said. But she had no notion what he was saying. They were in the middle of an argument, she supposed. But it came to an end without her understanding a word of it, except that it had to do with Napoleon. She took off her coat. They stopped talking. "I will go and tell Maggie," said Renny. He left them abruptly.

"You were talking about Napoleon?" Eleanor said. She looked at the man whose surname she had not heard. He was very dark; he had a rounded head and dark eyes.

Do I like you or don't I? she thought. He was a queer-looking man. He took her coat and laid it over the back of a chair. I've interrupted them, she felt, and I've nothing whatever to say. She felt dazed and cold. She spread her hands over the fire. It was a real fire; wood blocks were blazing; she wondered how they got wood blocks; the flame ran along the streaks of shiny tar.

"Napoleon: his temperature was always below normal," she said, warming her hands. She spoke without any meaning.

"We were considering the psychology of great men," he said, "by the light of modern science," he added with a little laugh. She wished the argument had been more within her reach.

"That's very interesting," she said shyly.

"Yes—if we knew anything about it," he said.

"If we knew anything about it . . ." she repeated. There was a pause. She felt numb all over—not only her hands, but her brain.

"You are very cold," he remarked. "Was it difficult, finding your way here?"

"Yes—no," she said. She did not wish him to think her a fool. "The psychology of great men . . ." she said. "Was that what you were discussing?"

"We were saying—" He paused. She guessed that he found it difficult to sum up their argument—they had evidently been talking for some time, judging by the newspapers lying about and the cigarette-ends on the table. Also he had some difficulty with the English language, for he spoke with a slight foreign accent.

"I was saying," he went on, "it is no use taking Napoleon; I was saying we do not know ourselves, ordinary people; and if we do not know ourselves, how then can we make religions, laws, that—" he used his hands as people do who find language obdurate, "that—"

"That fit—that fit," she said, supplying him with a word that was much shorter, she felt sure, than the dictionary word that foreigners always used.

"—that fit, that fit," he said, taking the word and repeating it as if he were grateful for her help. She smiled. She felt pleased that she had found the word he wanted. Her shyness was going. But did she like him? or not?

" . . . that fit," she repeated. She had no idea what they were talking about. Then suddenly, as she bent

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to warm her hands over the fire with words floated together in her mind and made one intelligible sentence. It seemed to her that what he had said was, "We cannot make laws and religions that fit because we do not know ourselves."

"How odd that you should say that!" she said, smiling at him, "because I've so often thought it myself!"

"But what is odd?" he said. "We all think the same things; only we do not say them."

"Coming along in the train tonight," she began, "I was thinking (about this war), I don't feel this, but other people do?" She stopped. He looked puzzled; probably she had misunderstood what he had said; anyhow she had not made her meaning plain.

"I mean," she began again, "I was thinking as I came along in the train—"

But here Renny came in.

"What will you have to drink?" he said. He was carrying a tray with bottles and glasses. "Drink!" Eleanor exclaimed. "What luxury!" She had not tasted wine for months; she felt a great desire for it suddenly. Renny uncorked the bottle.

"It is a great thing," said Nicholas, "being the friend of the son of a wine merchant."

It sounded like a quotation from the French grammar.

The friend of the son of the wine merchant, Eleanor repeated, as she took her glass. Of course he was French; the son of the wine merchant, with his big nose and dark eyes; but he had been educated in England. He was silent, like an Englishman; reserved; but the other man, she thought as she sipped, he's a talker, with those lips, and the eyes—which were full and brown. Was he Russian? Italian? What is he? she wondered as she drank: But I like him. The wine seemed to caress a knob in her spine.

"Maggie's coming," Renny said. He paused. "She's getting dinner." He paused again. "If the Allies," he began; he disregarded Eleanor; he seemed to go on with what he was thinking, "at the end of the Napoleonic Wars—" But here Maggie came in.

"Good-evening, Magdalena," said Nicholas, bowing profoundly in his foreign way.

"Good-evening, Eleanor," she said, disregarding Nicholas's bow as if she knew him very well. "We dine in the basement—if you don't mind?"

"No, of course I don't mind," said Eleanor.

"Then I'll show you the way," said Maggie, turning, "—because the soup's on the table."

"But Magdalena—" Nicholas interposed.

She did not answer. She was already showing Eleanor down the steep kitchen stairs.

"We've no servants," she was explaining, "—take care of that step—so we dine down here."

She led the way into a small room next the kitchen where dinner was laid.

"It saves carrying plates," she added.

"But Magdalena . . ." Nicholas repeated as they stood in the little, low-ceilinged room, "Sara said, 'We shall meet tomorrow night at Maggie's,' and she is no there." He stood looking round.

"She'll come in time," said Maggie. She lifted the lid of the soup tureen and began ladling out soup. The others sat down; but Nicholas remained standing.

"I shall ring her up," he said, and left the room.

"Isn't it much nicer," said Eleanor, taking her plate

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and looking round her, "having no servants?"

"We have a woman in to do the washing-up," said Maggie.

"And we are extremely dirty," said Renny. He took up a fork and examined it between the prongs. "No, this fork, as it happens, is clean," he said, and put it down.

Nicholas came back into the room again. He looked perturbed.

Why is he so much interested in Sara? Eleanor wondered. Are they engaged?

"She is not there," he said to Maggie. "I rang her up but I could get no answer."

"Probably she's on her way," said Maggie. "Or she may have forgotten and gone somewhere else."

She handed him his soup. But he sat looking at his plate without moving. Wrinkles had come on his forehead. He made no attempt to disguise his anxiety. He must be engaged to Sara, Eleanor thought; she liked him now that he was silent, and yet he puzzled her. He began gulping his soup in great mouthfuls, making a noise, for he was entirely without self-consciousness. He made no pretence of listening as they talked about servants.

"There!" he exclaimed, interrupting Eleanor, who was saying something about Crosby. She stopped but she could hear nothing. But as she listened she heard somebody coming rather haltingly down the kitchen stairs.

"Here she is!" said Nicholas. He put down his spoon and sat looking at the door. The door opened and Sara came in. She looked pinched with the cold; her cheeks were white here, and red there; and she blinked a little as if the light dazzled her. She hardly smiled at them, as if she were numb still from her walk through the blue shrouded streets. But she gave her hand to Nicholas as she sat down beside him and he kissed it.

"Yes. We are dirty," said Maggie, looking at her sister. She had not changed; she was in her day clothes. "And I'm in rags," she added, for a loop of gold thread hung down from her sleeve, as she handed Sara her soup.

"I was thinking how beautiful it is," Eleanor said, looking at her dress. It was silver with gold threads in it, but rather worn. Her eyes had been rested on it unconsciously with pleasure. "Where did you get it?" she asked.

"In Constantinople, from a Turk," said Maggie.

"A turbaned and fantastic Turk," Sara murmured, stroking the sleeve as she took her plate. "And that's pretty," she added, touching the golden rabbit, whose head made a boss on the soup tureen, "the golden rabbit." She still seemed dazed.

"Yes, and the plates too," said Eleanor, looking at the purple birds of Paradise on her plate. "Don't I remember them?" she asked.

"In a cabinet in the drawing-room at home," said Maggie. "But it seemed silly—keeping them in a cabinet," she added.

"We break one every week," said Renny.

"They'll last out the war," said Maggie.

Eleanor observed a curious mask-like expression fall over Renny's face as she said "the war." Like all the French, she thought, he feels passionately for his country. He was silent. He did something: he was in some works; she could not remember what.

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"But why were you so late?" said Nicholas, turning to Sara. He spoke gently and reproachfully, rather as if she were a child. He had let her finish her soup, Eleanor observed, before he spoke to her. Now he was helping her to wine. Take care, Eleanor felt inclined to warn her; you're still dazed from the cold; if you drink that it'll go to your head. She was feeling slightly light-headed herself. But Sara drank it. Then she burst out:

"Because of that damned fool."

"Damned fool?" said Maggie. "Which?"

"Eleanor's nephew," said Sara. "North. Eleanor's nephew, North." She held her glass towards Eleanor, as if she were addressing her. "North . . ." Then she smiled. "There I was, sitting alone. The bell rang. 'That's the wash,' I said. Footsteps came up the stairs. There was North—North," she raised her hand to her head as if in salute, "cutting a figure like this. . . . 'What the devil's that for?' I asked. 'I leave for the Front to-night,' he said, clicking his heels together. 'I'm a lieutenant in —' whatever it was—Royal Regiment of Rat-catchers or something. . . . And he hung his cap on the bust of our grandfather. And I poured out tea. 'How many lumps of sugar does a lieutenant in the Royal Rat-catchers require?' I asked. 'One. Two. Three. Four.'"

She dropped pellets of bread on to the table. Then she lapsed into silence. She dramatises things: just as Eugénie used to, Eleanor thought. But she liked her better than usual; she conveyed an impression of bitterness. She had grown older; she was less affected.

"Who is North?" Nicholas asked. He pronounced the word "North" as if it were a point on the compass.

"My nephew. My brother Morris's son," Eleanor explained.

"There he sat," Sara resumed, "in his mud-coloured uniform, with his switch between his legs, and his ears sticking out on either side of his pink, foolish face, and whatever I said, 'Good,' he said, 'Good,' 'Good,' until I took up the poker and tongs," she took up her knife and fork, "and played 'God save the King, Happy and Glorious, Long to reign over us—'" She held her knife and fork as if they were weapons.

"But isn't it natural——" Eleanor began.

But no one answered her. They were silent. Maggie got up and went into the kitchen. I'm sorry he's gone, Eleanor was thinking; he was a nice boy; who wrote poetry; he had just gone to college. . . .

"North is your nephew?" Nicholas interrupted, turning to Eleanor.

"Yes," she said. "A nice boy."

"Where was he educated?" he asked. She told him.

"And after that he went to college?" he spoke, she thought, rather like a doctor, questioning the relations of a patient. Was he a doctor? she wondered.

"Yes," she said. "He went to college."

Here Maggie came in with the meat and began to help them.

"How unfair you are," Eleanor heard Nicholas say, turning to Sara as if they were alone. "Prejudiced; narrow; unfair," he said, tapping her hand with his finger.

"Yes, don't you think it natural?" said Eleanor, turning to Renny. He was sitting there silent. "I remember feeling myself——" she began. For some reason she saw herself again on the terrace; and the maid came out and said that soldiers were guarding the

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line with fixed bayonets; and then she had felt—it was odd how that feeling came and went for no reason whatever: the feeling and the sight.

"Could you allow the Germans to invade us and do nothing?" she said, turning to Renny. The words were not the ones she had meant to use; and directly she had spoken them she was sorry. There was an expression of extreme passivity, or was it anger, on his face? He is French, she remembered. He would not feel what she felt—about England; but what did he feel? Something very strong, evidently; but so contradictory, it struck her, that he could not speak.

"I?" he said. "I help them to make shells." Maggie stood behind him.

"Carve," she said. He was staring at the meat which she had put down in front of him. He took up his knife and began to carve the rather scraggy joint mechanically.

"Now Nurse," she reminded him, as he laid down his knife. He carved another helping.

"Yes," said Eleanor awkwardly, as Maggie went out with the nurse's helping. She did not know what to say; but she wanted to help him; and perhaps it would help him to talk. "That's what I feel myself. Let's end it as quickly as possible and then——" She looked at him.

She felt sorry for him; and fond of him—not that she knew him well. He always frightened her a little; but the wine was breaking down barriers; and the lights; and the sense of being together here in this dining-room after the blue, muffled street. She looked round. "And then—what?" she prompted him. But the others were laughing, and he looked at them as if to take refuge in what they were saying from having to speak himself. Then Maggie came in and sat down to her own dinner.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"I want *him* to talk," said Eleanor. It was true; he interested her; but he shook his head. They listened to what Nicholas was saying. He talked, gesticulating with his hands, which were large and clean, with the finger-nails trimmed very close to the finger-tips, Eleanor noticed.

"So that's what you really said," he was saying. He was laughing at Sara as if they were very intimate. "Poppy-cock; poppy-cock; don't talk such damned poppy-cock," he laughed.

"What's poppy-cock?" Eleanor asked, turning to Renny. She did not know the word.

"American," said Renny. "He's an American," he added, nodding at Nicholas.

"No," said Nicholas, turning round. "I am a Pole."

That explains it, Eleanor thought; I knew he came of one of those races—not Latin, not English.

"His mother was a princess," said Maggie with a smile, as if she were teasing him. He was wearing a seal, Eleanor saw, with a coat of arms on it, hanging from his pocket.

"She was," he said quite seriously. "One of the noblest families in Poland. But my father was an ordinary man—a man of the people. I went to America," he added, "when I was twelve." Eleanor hoped he would go on; but he was silent. The others knew all that, she supposed, already.

"What a mix-up we are," she said, looking round the table as they were silent. "I'm English; Renny's French; he"—she hesitated, by what name to call

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him—" is a Pole. And your mother, Maggie——"

She was looking at a chair in the corner with gilt claws which she connected somehow with Eugénie.

"She was partly Irish and partly Spanish," said Maggie.

"A mix-up, a mix-up," Nicholas repeated, taking her words just as he had repeated "that fit," "that fit" before dinner. Then he looked at his hands and then, as Eleanor knew he would, began:

"And so for what reason do we go to war?"

It was impossible, Eleanor supposed, to keep off the war; but she wished he would, because Renny minded it so much. But he was off; he is one of those voluble foreigners, she thought, half listening, with a theory about everything. Governments want war; people don't. . . . Still, even if he talked nonsense, she thought, watching him touching his fingers, there was something she liked about him; something genial; if effusive.

"So it's for private people like ourselves . . ." she said, filling in a pause; for he had stopped and was searching in his pockets.

"I have brought my own sugar and butter, Maggie," he said, producing a little parcel.

"Oh, that reminds me," said Eleanor. She ought to have remembered that she had brought her butter before. She opened her bag and produced a greasy little parcel. "That's mine," she said, putting her butter on the common plate.

"And that damned humbug," said Sara, "your nephew North, Eleanor, your nephew North, ate all my butter and all my sugar."

"So you must sponge on us," said Renny, pushing the butter towards her.

"So I must sponge on you," she said, helping herself.

"You should have had more self-control, Sara," said Nicholas. He treated her rather as if she were a child, Eleanor thought—a child for whom he was responsible. Were they engaged, or were they not engaged? she wondered. She looked at Sara's hands; there was no ring on them.

"So I should," said Sara, leaning back in her chair. "That's true. But he gave his bridle reins a shake," she murmured, "and said, 'Adieu for evermore, adieu for evermore.'" She sighed, and then she drank again.

"You shall have no more to drink," said Nicholas. He moved away the bottle. That's right, Eleanor thought; wine goes to one's head when one's tired.

"She saw herself," he said, turning to Eleanor, "on top of a tower, waving a white handkerchief to a knight in armour."

"And the moon was rising over a dark moor," Sara murmured, and stretched out her hand and took up the pepper-pot. The pepper-pot's a dark moor, Eleanor thought, looking at it. A little blur had come round the edge of things. She was feeling warmed and soothed; the wine had run things together in her mind. It was partly the wine, partly the War, she thought, which made people intimate. Everything seemed to have lost its skin; to be freed from some surface hardness; even the chair at which she was looking, with its gilt claws and red cover, seemed to radiate out some glamour.

"Did that come from Browne Street?" she asked, pointing to it.

"That chair?" said Maggie. "Yes, it was in the hall. My mother bought it in Venice."

"I remember your mother so well," said Eleanor,

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leaning towards her. "She was"—all her good qualities seemed to come before her, not her bad ones—"so unlike other people," she added. "Everything about her," she said, remembering Eugénie.

"She used to dance," said Sara. She drummed on the table. "When I was young," she hummed, "I used to dance. All men loved me when I was young and used to dance. How did it go, Maggie? Roses and syringas hung, when I was young—when I was young. . . ." She tapped on the table.

"It was a waltz," said Maggie. They seemed to be remembering the same thing: "When I came up to your room after a party."

"A waltz?" said Eleanor. "Yes, we used to dance them."

Renny and Nicholas were arguing about something rather hotly. She turned to Maggie and Sara.

"There was a waltz we used to dance," she said. "How did it go?"

She tried to remember. She began to hum. Sara tapped the rhythm of a waltz on the table. Suddenly a long-drawn hollow sound wailed out.

"No, no!" Eleanor protested, as if somebody had given her the wrong note. The sound wailed again.

"A fog-horn," she said, "on the river?" But as she said it she knew what it was. They were all silent. The siren wailed again.

"Those damned Germans," said Renny. He put down his knife and fork. He spoke with an exaggerated gesture of boredom. Then Maggie got up and said something to her husband.

"The Germans," said Eleanor. She felt an absurd feeling of personal resentment; as if some dull bore had interrupted an interesting conversation. The colours began to fade. It was like a light going out; she was looking at the red chair. It seemed to lose its radiance.

"As you like," said Renny to Maggie; "but it won't make any difference, if a bomb falls on this house. . . ." But she had left the room.

"Maggie likes to bring the children down into the kitchen," he said, rather apologetically. "I'd better help her." He followed her out of the room. The others sat silent round the table. The sirens had stopped hooting. They heard the rush of wheels in the street. Everything seemed to be going past very quickly. They heard feet tapping along the pavement. Eleanor got up and drew the curtains slightly apart. The basement in which they sat was sunk beneath the pavement, so she only saw people's legs and skirts as they went past the area railings. Two men came past walking very quickly; then an old woman walked along, with her skirt swinging from side to side.

"Oughtn't we to ask people in?" she said, turning round. But when she looked back the old woman had disappeared. So had the men. The street was now quite empty. The houses opposite were completely curtained. She drew their own curtain carefully.

"And what about the lights?" she said. She looked at the brightly lit table with the gay china and the lamp hanging over it.

"Oh, they don't matter," said Nicholas. He laid his knife and fork neatly together. She sat down again. "D'you mind air raids?" he asked, looking at her with his inquisitive expression. "People differ so much."

"Not at all," she said. She would have crumbled a piece of bread to show him that she was at her ease;

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but as she was genuinely not afraid, the action seemed to her unnecessary. "The chances of being hit oneself seem so very small," she said. "What were we saying?" she asked.

It seemed to her that they had been saying something extremely interesting, but she could not remember what it was. They sat silent for a moment. Soon they heard a shuffling on the stairs.

"They're bringing the children down," said Eleanor. "Ought we to go and help?"

"No," said Sara. "The children are put in the kitchen; we sit in the coal cellar." She spoke as if there were a regular routine which they had followed often before. "Then Maggie's happy," she added, "because she thinks we shall all be killed together."

"But if a bomb fell on this house—" Nicholas began. As he spoke they heard the dull boom of a gun far away, and Renny came in.

"Bring your plates," he said, "and come and sit in the cellar."

They took their plates and went out into the narrow passage. The basement was dark save for the light of the kitchen fire. As they passed the door, Eleanor could see bundles laid on chairs—the sleeping children apparently.

"In here," said Renny. He turned on the light in the cellar. It was a large cellar; with its crypt-like ceiling and stone walls it had a damp, ecclesiastical look. It was used partly for coal, partly for wine. The light in the centre shone upon glittering heaps of coal; bottles of wine wrapped in straw lay on their sides on stone shelves. The house was very old and solidly built; but the cellar was chilly after the dining-room. It had a mouldy smell, of wine, straw and damp. Renny brought in some hard kitchen chairs.

"Where is Sara?" said Nicholas. Eleanor noticed his anxiety again. She liked him for showing it.

Here she came in, carrying quilts and dressing-gowns which she had fetched from upstairs. Eleanor was glad to wrap herself in a blue dressing-gown that Nicholas handed her. She wrapped it round her and sat holding her plate on her knees.

"And now?" said Sara, holding her plate on her knees. They all looked as if they were waiting for something to happen. Maggie came in carrying a large plum pudding. "We may as well finish our dinner," she said. She spoke a shade too sensibly, Eleanor thought; she was anxious about her children, she guessed.

"Are they asleep?" she asked.

"Yes. But if the guns—" she began helping the pudding. Another gun boomed out. This time it was distinctly louder.

"They've got through the defences," said Nicholas. They began to eat their pudding.

"Is your nurse nervous?" Eleanor asked.

"No, she's got a candle and she's reading a book," said Maggie. She was listening as she spoke.

"What book?" said Nicholas.

"A shilling shocker," said Maggie.

"I should have thought she'd got shilling shockers enough," Renny began, "without—" A gun boomed again; this time there was a bark in its boom.

"Hampstead," said Nicholas. He took out his watch. Then they went on eating again. The silence was profound.

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"This is a magnificent cellar," said Eleanor, looking round, as nothing seemed to happen. It looked as if it had been built to stand a raid; blocks of stone arched over their heads. She noticed a spider's web in one corner. "Perhaps," she suggested, "it was part of the Abbey?" It reminded her of a crypt, of a . . . But another gun boomed. This time the noise was different—a sigh of air rushed up with it. It was right on top of them.

"The Embankment," said Nicholas. Maggie put down her plate and went into the kitchen. Renny rather ostentatiously, Eleanor thought, took another mouthful of pudding. Nicholas looked at his watch as if he were timing the guns. There was something queer about him, Eleanor thought; medical? priestly? Perhaps it was his dressing-gown. She noticed everything more distinctly than usual; the number on the box—1397. The Germans must be very close now. They're overhead, she thought, looking up at the stone arch. One, two, three, four, she counted. She felt a curious heaviness on top of her head as she looked up at the greenish-grey stone. Then there was a violent crack of sound, like a split of lightning in the sky. The spider's web oscillated.

"On top of us," said Nicholas. He spoke as if he were making a scientific observation. They all looked up. There was dead silence. At any moment a bomb might fall.

"That was nothing—turn round and go to sleep," they heard Maggie say in the kitchen. She spoke very calmly and soothingly.

One, two, three, four, Eleanor counted. At any moment now, she thought, looking at the stone, that stone will fall. The spider's web was swaying. A gun boomed. It was fainter—distinctly fainter.

"That's over," said Nicholas. He shut his watch with a little click. They all shifted their positions as if they had been sitting in uncomfortable attitudes. But they did not begin to eat again. Again the guns sounded but they were fainter now.

"They're going towards the Crystal Palace," said Renny.

Eleanor felt as if she too were travelling away in the air towards the Crystal Palace; but at the same time she was sitting in the cellar with a plate of plum pudding on her knee. She looked at the plum pudding, not knowing for the moment where she was. The guns were still firing; but they were further and further away. Maggie came in.

"Well, that's over," she said. "He woke for a moment, but he went off to sleep again," she said in an undertone to Renny, "but the baby slept right through." She sat down and took the plate that Renny was holding for her.

"Now let's finish our pudding," she said, speaking in her natural voice.

"Now we will have some wine," said Renny. He examined one bottle; then another; finally he took a third and wiped it carefully with the tail of his dressing-gown. He placed the bottle on a wooden case and they sat round in a circle.

"It didn't come to much, did it?" said Sara. She was tilting back her chair as she held out her glass.

"Ah, but we were frightened," said Nicholas. "Look—how pale we all look."

They looked at each other. Draped in their quilts

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and dressing-gowns, against the grey-green walls, they all looked whitish, greenish.

"It's partly the light," said Maggie. "Eleanor," she said, looking at her, "looks like an abbess."

The deep-blue dressing-gown which hid the foolish little ornaments, the tabs of velvet and lace on her dress, had improved her appearance. Her middle-aged face was crinkled like an old glove that has been creased into a multitude of fine lines.

"Untidy, am I?" she said, putting her hand to her hair.

"No. Don't touch it," said Maggie, looking at her.

"And what were we talking about before the raid?" Eleanor asked. Again she felt that they had been in the middle of saying something very interesting when they were interrupted. But there had been a complete break; none of them could remember what they had been saying.

"That proves we were afraid," said Nicholas. He held up his finger as if he were lecturing.

"Well, it's over now," said Sara. "So let's drink a health—Here's to the New World!" she exclaimed, raising her glass with a flourish.

They all felt a sudden desire to talk and laugh. They clinked their glasses together over the wooden box.

"Now, Nicholas," Sara said, putting her glass down. "A speech! A speech!"

"I shall shut the kitchen door," said Maggie.

She shut it.

"Now you can make your speech," she said, sitting down.

"Ladies and gentlemen"—he began; he flung his hand out exactly like an orator—"I will now ask you to pledge yourselves. Ladies and gentlemen . . ." as if he were suddenly overcome with imitation.

"We don't want speeches," Renny interrupted him.

Eleanor was disappointed. If he wanted to make a speech, she thought, why not let him? She liked him for not minding if he made a fool of himself or not. Also, if he spoke, it would relieve her of her own emotion. But he seemed to take the interruption quite good-humouredly.

"Very well, then," he said. "We will talk sense. Let me see. Let us each tell a story—" he began.

But Maggie held up her finger.

"I thought I heard the guns again," she said. They listened. The guns were firing here and there in a circle.

"They're coming back . . ." Maggie asked.

"Perhaps they've mistaken one of themselves for the enemy . . ." said Eleanor. They listened. The firing was far away; it came no nearer.

"They're only killing other people," said Renny.

He put down his glass. But you must let us think of something else, Eleanor thought, looking at him. He seemed to her to be unable either to control his feelings or to express them.

"And what nonsense, what nonsense you talk, Renny," said Nicholas. "As if this war were of any importance whatsoever. . . ." He tapped his wine-glass. "Children letting off fireworks in the back garden," he remarked. He spoke to himself. Renny made no answer.

Eleanor was not certain what he meant; but it hitched on to something in her own mind, and, as the usual transitions were broken, as it did not seem to matter much what one said, she hazarded:

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"Because people didn't live very nice lives before the War, you mean, so why make all this fuss? I've often thought that myself," she added.

"We didn't live very nice lives before," he repeated. "No. And even now"—he stretched his hand out; it almost touched the other wall of the cellar—"we don't live very nice lives."

"In this cellar," said Sara, "this cave of mud and dung." She put her glass down with a jerk on top of the wooden case. They had finished their wine. A draught came in under the door-sill and played about their ankles. It was decidedly chilly; and there was a damp cellar smell of wine and straw.

"Shall we go upstairs?" said Maggie. "They're not coming back. . . ."

They listened. The guns were still firing; but they only made a very distant concussion, like the breaking of a wave on the shore miles away.

"Yes," said Renny. "Let's go." He began piling the plates on top of each other. Then they went into the kitchen to help the nurse to carry the children.

Eleanor began to fold up her dressing-gown.

"What did you do before the War, Eleanor?" said Nicholas, helping her to disentangle herself from the muddle.

He calls me "Eleanor," she thought, with a thrill of pleasure. That's so sensible . . . she added it to her liking for him.

"I built some houses," she said, beginning to walk up the kitchen stairs. "But they fell down," she added half to herself as she went upstairs. That is one of the good things about the War, she thought; we don't make such a ceremony. But what shall I call him? Nicholas? She did not know his other name.

She came into the drawing-room. It looked larger than she remembered it, and very spacious and comfortable. Papers were strewn on the floor; the fire was burning brightly; it was warm and cheerful. She sank down into an armchair. Sara and Nicholas had lagged behind. The others were helping the nurse to carry the children up to bed, she supposed. She lay back in the chair. Everything seemed to become quiet and natural again. A feeling of great calm possessed her. It was as if another space of time had been issued to her, but, robbed by the presence of death, of something personal, she felt—she hesitated for a word; "immune?" Was that what she meant? Immune, she said, from my self in some way, she thought, looking at a picture without seeing it. Immune, she repeated. It was a picture of a hill and a village perhaps in the South of France; perhaps in Italy. There were olive trees; and white roofs grouped against a hillside. It is like another world, she thought, looking at the picture.

She could hear a gentle thudding on the floor above; Maggie and Renny were settling the children into their beds again, she supposed. There was a little squeak, like a sleepy bird chirping in its nest. It was all very private and peaceful after the guns. She had lost her sense of travelling through the air. She felt very tired as she sat there. But here the others came in.

"Did they mind it?" she said, sitting up, "—the children?"

"No," said Maggie. "They slept through it."

"But they may have dreamt," said Sara, pulling up a chair. They all sat down. Nobody spoke. It was very silent. The clocks that used to boom out the hour in

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Westminster, Eleanor remembered, had been silenced. But Nicholas was holding out his cigarette-case.

"Thanks so much," she said, taking one. "That's just what I wanted."

"Why do you smoke those nasty things?" said Renny. "Try this." He offered her a cigar.

"But shan't I be sick?" she said. She placed it gingerly in her mouth.

"It's a mild one," he said. She puffed, and a little trickle of smoke oozed out. Nobody seemed to wish to talk. Maggie took up the poker and struck the wood blocks. The sparks went volleying up the chimney in a shower of gold eyes.

"How that makes me—" Eleanor began. She stopped.

"Yes?" said Nicholas.

"Think of my childhood," she added. She puffed again at her cigar. "The firemen, flying up the chimney."

She was thinking of Morris and herself, and old Pippy—but nobody would know what she meant.

They were silent. She puffed at her cigar.

"Take it easily; take it quietly," said Renny.

He blew a perfect ring through his nose. The heavy circle hung for a moment in the air.

"How do you do it?" she asked. He did it again. One ring went through the other, and the two rings, melting and mixing, wobbled away in long curves of smoke. Eleanor hollowed her mouth and blew too; but without success. As she tried again, a clear flute-like note rang out in the street below.

"What's that?" said Maggie. She started. She looked at the window; she seemed about to rise.

"It's all right," said Renny, putting his hand out to stop her. "The bugles," he added. "The All Clear."

The bugles blew again below the window. Then they heard them further down the street; and then again further away down the next street. The sound faded away. Almost directly the hooting of cars began, and the rushing of wheels, as if the traffic had been released, and the usual night life of London had begun again.

"Well, that's over," said Maggie. She lay back in her chair. She looked very tired for a moment; then she pulled a basket towards her and began sorting out stockings and socks.

"That's a mercy," said Eleanor. "I'm glad I'm alive," she added. She felt as if she were making a confession. For other people of course, as Renny had said, were being killed. He was leaning on his elbow smoking his cigar and looking into the fire.

"Is that wrong, Renny?" she asked, for she respected him.

"I don't lay down laws for other people," he said.

"Renny, Renny, Renny," said Nicholas, as if he were expostulating with a naughty child.

"I have spent the evening sitting in a coal-cellar while other people try to kill themselves above my head," he said. He continued to smoke his cigar and to gaze into the fire.

"But, Renny—" Eleanor began. He reached out without paying her any attention, and picked up a newspaper.

"He poisons himself," said Nicholas, pointing to the floor littered with newspapers. Renny went on reading.

The rushing of wheels and the hooting of motor

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horns went on, but they had now become usual and they did not notice them any more. As Renny was reading and Maggie was darning, there was silence in the room. It seemed to be unnecessary for anybody to talk. I wonder what we are thinking, Eleanor thought as she puffed at her cigar. The presence of the others seemed to press upon her though nobody spoke. Everybody seemed to give off some influence which affected her now with liking, now with disliking. All the evening she had been adding this to that, and then taking it away and adding something different. But beneath it, now that they were silent, was something that went beneath the surface feelings of liking, of disliking. A common feeling; a nameless feeling. . . .

"What are you thinking, Eleanor?" Nicholas interrupted her.

"Oh nothing—" she said, looking up. "It's difficult to say what one thinks, isn't it?" she added. . . . "Will there ever be a time," she said, "when we shall be able to say—to say what we think?" she asked him. She felt at a loss for words.

"Yes, yes," he said.

She smiled; she liked his optimism.

"D'you think we're going to improve?" she asked.

"Yes, yes," he said, nodding his head.

He spoke quietly as if he did not wish to rouse Renny who was reading, or Maggie who was darning. They seemed to be talking privately together.

"It is only a question of learning," he said. "The soul—" he began. But he stopped. He drew closer to Eleanor.

"Yes—the soul?" she prompted him, as if to assure him that the word, though seldom used, was a good one.

"It's a question," he said, bending towards her so that they seemed to be in a little shelter together, "how to educate the soul."

"The soul," she said, wondering what he meant by it.

"The soul—the whole being." He explained; he hollowed his hands. "It wishes to rush; to expand; always adventuring; always forming new"—he hesitated—"combinations?"

"Yes—combinations. That's all right," she confirmed him.

"Whereas now," he continued, "this is how we live."

She looked at him. He had drawn himself together in his chair; he had put his feet together neatly; he looked like an old lady who is afraid of mice.

"This is how we live, screwed up into one tight little hard little—"

"Knot?" she suggested.

"Yes, knot," he replied. "Each in his own separate cubicle; each with his own little cross or holy book; each with his fire; with his wife—"

"Darning socks," said Maggie. She laid the sock on her knee and smoothed out the darn.

"What are you talking about?" said Renny.

He threw away his paper.

"The soul," said Maggie.

"Oh, the soul," said Renny. He stretched out and took up another paper.

"He poisons himself, he poisons himself," said Nicholas, shaking his head. But Renny went on reading.

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"Well?" said Eleanor, turning to Nicholas privately again.

"Well?" he asked.

"You were saying . . ." she began. "How we can . . . improve ourselves . . . live more . . ." she dropped her voice; she was afraid of using words that sounded priggish, ". . . live more naturally . . . better. How can we?"

"Oh, we can, we can," he nodded. He held his hands hollowed again, with the cigarette still burning in them. He seemed to have it all ready, she thought, some theory; some simple solution. Perhaps if he did talk he would go on talking for ever, she thought. But she wanted him to go on talking. She felt not only a new space of time, but new powers; something unknown in her.

"We can improve in time, you think?" she said in a low voice.

"Of course, of course," he said in a low voice too, as if they were talking in the presence of sleepers.

"But how long will it take?" she murmured. She puffed at her cigar so that the smoke might obscure her face.

"Five hundred years? A thousand?" he said, shrugging his shoulders. A rush of disappointment went through her. It was absurd, but she had felt that it was within his power to bring about an instant miracle, and now there was to be no miracle, not for a thousand years.

"Then we shall never know what it's like," she said. She could not prevent her disappointment sounding in her voice, absurd though it was.

"Not in the body," he said. "No."

"But I don't believe in the life after death," she murmured. "Do you?"—she hesitated; she had not yet called him by his name—"Nicholas?" she said, tentatively.

He shook his head. "But I believe," he added, drawing his chair an inch or two towards her, "in our life here on earth."

"But if I'm not conscious of my life here on earth?" she murmured.

"My life, no; our life, yes," he said.

"That's a quotation, isn't it?" she asked. She seemed to remember reading it somewhere; and he spoke as if he were quoting.

"A quotation?—is it?" he said, throwing away his cigarette. "Very possibly. There is no such thing as an original saying. We all think the same things."

"Only we don't say them," she said. That was what they had said when she came in. They had got back to the same point again. She wanted now to go on; she wanted to ask him all sorts of things; she wanted to ask him—But Maggie put down her sock and turned round. "Yes, that's all very well," she said. She looked at Nicholas as if she were referring to something he had said—something that had stuck in her mind. "But if we have to earn our livings, Nicholas?"

Eleanor felt a keen shock of disappointment. Somebody always broke in and interrupted, she thought, just as one was beginning to understand. Renny threw down his paper.

"It's all damned rot," he said. Whether he referred to the paper, or whether he had overheard what they had been saying, Eleanor did not know. But it was impossible to go on talking privately.

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"Why d'you buy them, then?" she said, pointing to the papers.

"To light the fires," said Renny.

Maggie laughed. She stopped talking to Nicholas. She threw the sock she had mended on the table. "There!" she said. "Mended."

She lay back in the chair and passed her hands over her eyes as if she were relieved to have done with her darning. They were all silent, looking at the fire.

"Where d'you get such good wood?" Eleanor asked. Her own fire had been reduced in the past months; when she lit it there was only a feeble trickle of gas.

"I met a man with a barrow in the Brompton Road and made eyes at him," said Maggie. She raised her eyes and let them fall again. Renny made a sound something between pish and pshaw. But you must let us think of something else, Eleanor thought, looking at him.

Again they were silent. Again Eleanor felt words coming together in her mind, as if when people talked they threw words into your mind, and then after a time they floated together and made sentences. She was tired; it took her some time to make words come together. But if Maggie said We have to earn our livings, and Renny said It's all such rot; what he meant was—she glanced at him—for some reason he was laughing now; but what he had meant was: Here am I earning my living; how, then, can I develop the soul—She looked at Nicholas as if she wanted him to confirm what she was thinking. But he was talking to Sara. Eleanor had forgotten her. She was leaning forward in her chair, propping her head on her hands with a book on her knee. That was the way one read when one was a child, Eleanor thought.

"And what have you been thinking all this time?" Nicholas was saying to her. "Or have you been asleep?" he added.

She put her hand between the pages and looked up. "I heard what you were saying," she said. She shut her book and yawned.

"What were we saying?" he asked.

"The soul flying upwards—like sparks up the chimney," she said, waving her hand.

The sparks were flying up the chimney. Renny was poking the fire.

"That wasn't such a bad shot," said Nicholas. Eleanor observed again the queerness of his attitude towards her; it was protective, and very intimate; and yet she felt that it lacked—what was it? She looked at Renny and Maggie—some kind of warmth, she thought.

"Because people always say the same thing," said Sara. She roused herself and sat up. "There's Maggie," she said. "She says nothing; there's Renny"—she pointed at him. "He says, 'What damned rot!' Eleanor says, 'That's just what I was thinking'; and Nicholas—Nicholas," she repeated, tapping him on the knee and laughing, "who ought to be in prison, says, 'Oh my, dear friends, let us improve the soul!'"

"Ought he to be in prison?" said Eleanor. Was he a Conscientious Objector? she wondered, looking at him.

"Because he loves," Sara explained. She paused. "—the other sex, the other sex, you see," she said lightly, waving her hand in the way that was so like Eugénie's.

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For a moment a sharp shiver of repugnance passed across Eleanor as if a knife had sliced her skin. But it touched nothing of any importance, she realised; and it explained a great deal. Nicholas was watching her.

"Does that," he said, hesitating a little, "make you dislike me, Eleanor?"

"Not in the least!" she said spontaneously. She had felt many things about him in the course of the evening; she had liked him for this; disliked him for that; but now they all swam together; and liking was uppermost.

"Not in the least," she repeated.

"The one thing I respect him for," said Sara, "they put him in prison for."

"It's all such rot!" Renny exclaimed.

"Didn't I say so?" said Sara. "It's all such rot, it's all such rot." She laughed, imitating her brother-in-law. Then she yawned.

"I shall go to bed," she said. "I'm sleepy."

Eleanor looked at her watch. It was late—later than she expected. She got up, and parted the curtains. The cold winter's night was almost black; it was like looking out into a hollow dark-blue stone. Frosty little stars twinkled over the houses, but they were merely black shapes.

"I'll get you a cab," said Renny, as she took up her coat.

"No, I'll walk," she said. "I like walking in London."

"And we will come with you," said Nicholas. "Come, Sara; here is your hat; here is your bag." He gave her her bag.

"Are you sure you have your latchkey in it?" he asked. She spilt the contents of her bag onto her lap as she sat on the arm of the chair. "Half a crown; two shillings; seven coppers and a threepenny-bit," she counted. "But where's my latchkey? Have I a latchkey, or—"

"Here it is on the floor," said Nicholas, picking up the key and giving it her. "So come," he said.

"But I don't want to come," said Sara. "I want to stay; I want to talk; I want to sing. I want to raise a hymn of praise. . . ."

"Come," said Nicholas. "Come." He took her by the shoulder and pushed her out of the room.

Eleanor went up to say good-night to Maggie. "I should like to stay too," she said. "There's so much I want to say—"

"But I want to go to bed—I want to go to bed," said Renny.

"So you shall," said Maggie, as if he were a child. She picked up the newspapers and began tidying the room.

"Don't bother to come down," Eleanor protested as Renny opened the door for her. But he insisted. He was very tired; he was longing to go to bed, she felt. But all the same he was very polite. Very polite and very rude, she felt. Contradictory somehow. The sort of man, she thought as she went downstairs with him, who feels many different things; and all passionately; all at the same time. . . . But they had reached the hall. Nicholas and Sara were standing there.

"Cease to laugh at me for once, Sara," Nicholas was saying as he put on his coat.

"And cease to lecture me," she said, opening the front door.

Renny smiled at Eleanor as they stood for a moment

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by the perambulator.

"Educating themselves," he said.

"Good-night," she said, smiling as she shook hands.

"Good-night," he said, and shut the door.

That is the man, she said to herself with a sudden rush of conviction as she came out into the air, that I should like to have married. She had never felt that for any of the men who had wanted to marry her; but this was the feeling that she might have felt. And he's twenty years younger than I am, she thought as she walked up the street, and married to my cousin. For a moment she resented the passage of time and the accidents of life which had swept her away from—away from all that she thought with a sudden sense of the evening as a whole. For as she walked behind the others up the dark little street, some things sank; others rose; and it became clear to her that all the evening she had felt one constant and continuous feeling—that it was a happy marriage. Which is rare, she said, very rare.

She looked up. A broad fan of light, like the sail of a windmill, was sweeping across the sky. It paused as if it pondered something; it lit up a fleecy little patch of sky. Then it swept on again; and as it moved it seemed to her to take what she was feeling and to express it, broadly and simply, in a way that was a relief to her feelings. Then she suddenly remembered.

"I'd forgotten the raid!" she exclaimed. She stopped for a moment. Nicholas and Sara stopped too. They were in Victoria Street. There were no signs of anything unusual. The street was perhaps emptier and darker than usual. But there were people walking along the pavement; they emerged for a moment under a lamp and then vanished into the darkness again.

"Will the omnibuses be running as usual?" Eleanor asked.

They looked round them.

"Yes; there is an omnibus," said Nicholas as one of the great forms loomed up through the darkness. Its lights were shrouded with blue paint.

"Then I shall wait here," said Eleanor. They all waited at the corner for a moment.

"Then I shall go," said Sara abruptly. "Good-night!" She waved her hand and walked away. Eleanor took it for granted that Nicholas would go with her. She held out her hand to him.

"I shall wait here," she repeated.

But he did not move. Sara was already vanishing. She did not look after her. Eleanor felt that some inexplicable gloom had come over him. Was he angry? Was he unhappy? She did not know. But here her omnibus stopped beside them. She could think of nothing to say as she took his hand. As the omnibus moved, she looked back and saw him still standing on the pavement. He still had his hat in his hand. He looked tall, impressive and solitary standing there alone. Then she lost sight of him.

The omnibus was almost empty. What passengers there were sat huddled up, silent, shrouded in the blue light, which made them look cadaverous, unreal and spectral. But there was one old man in the corner opposite her who was eating something out of a paper bag. She could not help wondering what he was eating

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at this time of night. He looked up and caught her staring at him.

"Like to see what I've got for supper, lady?" he said, cocking one eyebrow over his rheumy, twinkling old eyes. And he held out for her inspection a hunk of bread on which was laid a slice of cold meat or sausage.

"Dirty brute," Crosby muttered as she hobbled along the asphalt path. Her legs were paining her. It was not actually raining, but the great open space was full of mist; and there was nobody near, so that she could talk aloud.

"Dirty brute," she muttered again. She had got into the habit of talking aloud. There was nobody in sight; the end of the path was lost in mist. It was very silent. Only the rooks gathered on the tree-tops now and then let fall a queer little croak, and a leaf, spotted with black, fell to the ground. Her face twitched as she walked, as if her muscles had got into the habit of protesting, involuntarily, against the spites and obstacles that tormented her. She had aged greatly during the past four years. She looked so small and hunched that it seemed doubtful if she could make her way across the wide open space that lay in front of her, shrouded in white mist. But she had to go to the High Street to do her shopping.

"The dirty brute," she muttered again. She had had some words that morning with Mrs Burt about the Count's bath. He spat in it, and Mrs Burt had told her to clean it.

"Count indeed—he's no more Count than you are," she continued. She was now talking to Mrs Burt. "I'm quite willing to oblige you," she went on. Even out here, in the mist, where she was free to say what she liked, she adopted a conciliatory tone, because she knew that they wanted to get rid of her. She gesticulated with the hand that was not carrying the bag as she told Louisa that she was quite ready to oblige her. She hobbled on. "And I shouldn't mind going either," she added bitterly, but this was spoken to herself only. It was no pleasure to her to live in the house any more; but there was nowhere else for her to go, as the Burts knew very well.

"And I'm quite ready to oblige you," she added aloud, as indeed she had said to Louisa herself. But the truth was that she was no longer able to work as she had done. Her legs pained her. It took all the strength out of her to do her own shopping, let alone to clean the bath. But it was all take-it-or-leave-it now. In the old days she would have sent the whole lot packing.

"Drabs . . . hussies," she said. She was now addressing the red-haired servant girl who had flung out of the house yesterday without warning. She could easily get another job. It didn't matter to her. So it was left to Crosby to clean the Count's bath.

"Dirty brute, dirty brute," she repeated; her pale-blue eyes glared impotently. She saw once more the blob of spittle that the Count had left on the side of his bath—the Belgian who called himself a Count. "I've been used to work for gentlefolk, not for dirty foreigners like you," she told him as she hobbled.

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The broken words formed on her lips as she hobbled towards the ghostly line of trees. The roar of traffic sounded louder. She could see houses beyond the trees. She was approaching the High Street. Her pale-blue eyes peered forward through the mist as she made her way towards the railings. Her eyes alone seemed to express an unconquerable determination; she was not going to give in; she was bent on surviving. The soft mist was slowly lifting. Leaves lay damp on the asphalt path. The rooks croaked and shuffled on the tree-tops. Now a dark line of railings emerged from the mist. The roar of traffic in the High Street sounded louder and louder. Crosby stopped and rested her bag on the railing before she went on to do battle with the crowd of shoppers in the High Street. She would have to shove and push, and be jostled this way and that; and her feet pained her. They didn't mind if you bought or not, she thought; and often she was pushed out of her place by some bold-faced drab. She thought of the red-haired girl again, as she stood there, panting slightly, with her bag on the railing. Her legs pained her. The long-drawn note of a siren floated out its melancholy wail of sound; then there was a dull explosion.

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"Them guns again," Crosby muttered, looking up at the pale-grey sky with peevish irritation. The rooks, scared by the gun-fire, rose and wheeled round the tree-tops. Then there was another dull boom. A man on a ladder who was painting the windows of one of the houses paused with his brush in his hand and looked round. A woman who was walking along carrying a loaf of bread that stuck half out of its paper wrapping stopped too. They both waited as if for something to happen. A topple of smoke drifted over and flopped down from the chimneys. The guns boomed again. The man on the ladder said something to the woman on the pavement. She nodded her head. Then he dipped his brush in the pot and went on painting. The woman walked on. Crosby pulled herself together and tottered across the road into the High Street. The guns went on booming and the sirens wailed. The war was over—so somebody told her as she took her place in the queue at the grocer's shop.

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The sun was shining almost with summer heat, though it was still early in May, and the long line of cars that blocked Richmond High Street had been forced to come to a standstill. They kept up an intermittent, impatient hooting; but none of them could move. The sun struck on their glossy sides; it made bright spots on the silver-plated handles; on the glossy, varnished panels. The narrow street was completely blocked for the moment. Dazed with the hum and the uproar, with the hooting, and throbbing of cars, Crosby stood on the pavement hypnotised into a trance. She looked like an old insect that has outlived the winter and suns itself upon a leaf.

Suddenly she straightened and stiffened. Her hands clutched her bag; her eyes became bluer, more prominent, and fixed themselves upon the face of a gentleman in the large car that was drawn up in front of her.

"Mr Edward!" she muttered. "There's Mr Edward!" He was only a hand-breadth from her; only the glass of the window between them. Her mouth hung open as she gazed. There was a lady beside him in black. She was talking; she turned her face towards Crosby as she said something.

"Miss Kitty!" Crosby murmured. And she was in

black because his lordship was dead; Crosby had seen his death in the newspapers. The cars hooted impatiently. People jostled behind her. But Crosby stood still, staring. She took in every detail; Lady Lasswade had a rug over her knees; she was greyer than she used to be, but still extremely handsome; and there was a great dog on the seat. If only somebody had been with her, to whom she could have pointed them out. . . . But here the car moved on; all the cars moved on. Crosby was left staring on the pavement. She kept her eyes on the car as if it were a vision, fading, slowly withdrawing from her sight. She could still see the back of Mr Edward's head; she could still see the great dog on the seat; but now an omnibus came between, and she could see the car no longer.

"It must have been higher up," said Kitty, as the car pulled out and swept smoothly up the hill. "... a little old house with a balcony."

She glanced at the houses on her right.

"We used to drive down and have tea," she said. "There was a lawn that sloped down to the river." Since her husband was dead, and this visit had been with him, there was a touch of sadness in her words; but she spoke cheerfully. There was nothing of the lugubrious draped widow about her, Edward thought. She looked extremely handsome in her black; and her complexion was still white and pink like a girl's; and that pleased him, for they were about the same age.

The car swept on up the hill. Then the houses stopped; and the view opened on the right.

"The view—" said Kitty, turning to look at it.

"The famous view—" said Edward. Down below opened a wide space with a far blue distance of fields, and immediately below on the flat, the river wound, silver, serpentine, set with little boats.

"Where does that come?" said Edward. "In what novel?"

"Dickens?" she said on the spur of the moment.

"No, no, no!" he expostulated, smiling.

Why no, no, no, she asked herself, feeling slightly piqued.

"Haven't an idea," she said. She slipped the rug from her knee and tapped on the glass.

"We'll get out here," she said, and the car stopped inside the Park gates. The great dog bounded out first, and then she got out and told the chauffeur to meet them at another gate. They were going to walk across the Park.

"And I shan't want this," she said, tossing her coat into the car. "It's too hot."

Indeed it was the first day of summer. The trees were sprigged with little green spots; but the leaves were still crinkled, half furred. Here and there a solitary tree rose, like a torrent, a torrent of black iron. But the air was so soft, so gummy, that it seemed as if buds and leaves must be forming even in the black tree under the iron bark. The hum of the traffic now muted, and the distance that lay so blue before them seemed to wrap the whole earth in the softness, the haze of fertility.

The great shaggy dog bounced through the bracken.

"He's enjoying himself," said Edward.

"Yes, he hates London," said Kitty.

The dog had been waiting in the car which had fetched them from the lunch party where they had met.

"He won't chase the deer?" Edward asked—there were deer feeding at a little distance in the bracken.

"Heel, Sultan," said Kitty sharply, and the dog slunk back to her side.

They walked on briskly in silence. The air carried with it little sounds—of branches creaking, of birds chirping—almost as if they were in the country.

"And you're leaving London?" said Edward, turning to her.

"Yes," she said, "—tearing things up. You can't think," she added, "what a lot there is to tear up after thirty years."

"Is it as long as that?" he asked.

"Well—" she paused, making a calculation, "I was married in eighteen-eighty-five, and it's now nineteen-twenty-one."

"That's thirty—that's thirty-six years!" he exclaimed. "Yes, it's a long time."

They were silent. The air and the movement had done away with constraint at first; but now they both felt a little shy. They had not met since her husband's death the year before. They were walking down a green drive, with a plantation on either side of them. The dog jumped over the palings into the wood. They could hear the dry twigs crackling under him as he leapt about snuffling among the dead leaves. Then horse's hoofs thudded behind them, and a couple on horseback came cantering past.

"D'you ever ride now?" said Kitty, watching the riders lurch up and down in their saddles.

"When I stay with Hugh at the Towers," Edward said.

"He was always a great man on horseback," she smiled. "How well I remember—Tony Ashton, Hugh Gibbs—the three of you!" she paused. "You used to ride together at Oxford," she said. She was silent, as if she were thinking back to their youth.

"Who's at the Lodge now?" she asked, keeping one eye on Sultan. There was a little herd of does in front of them, stepping daintily through the ferns.

"The Antonys still?" she enquired, rather absent-mindedly for she did not want Sultan to chase the deer.

"Heel," she said sharply. "Heel."

"The Antonys?" said Edward. He seemed a little surprised at her question. "No—he died, six months ago."

"Did he?" she said, keeping an eye on her dog. "And who's there now then?"

"Nobody," he said, "at the moment."

She detected some self-consciousness in his voice as she watched her dog snuffing about among the ferns.

"You, Edward?" she said lightly, "will they give it you?" He raised his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. She recognised the familiar gesture which made her feel at ease with him. And he was still very handsome; very distinguished-looking, she thought.

"Yes, of course," she said, as if she had suddenly realised something. He was silent. He did not deny it or confirm it. They always keep these things a mystery, she reflected with a little amusement.

"You'll live in the old house where we used to live," she said aloud. "How odd!"

She saw the tree leaning on its prop; and the drawing-room; and her mother sitting there stitching at her embroidery.

"And is there electric—" But she stopped in the

middle of her question; for they had come out of the ride between the trees and stood on a little rise of ground looking down on a silver shield of water. A flight of birds came over in single file; they circled high then swooped low, trailed their legs in the water, and swam along.

"Wild duck!" she exclaimed.

"Yes. Wild duck," he said. "But you never liked it," he resumed, as they walked on down the hill, "Did you?"

"Oxford? No, not as a girl," she said.

She saw again the muslin blind blowing out across the dressing-table, and heard all the clocks striking, one after the other.

"One was so—cooped up there," she said; "I mean as a girl." She sighed. She wished now she had not quarrelled so often with her mother. But she stopped. A musical wooden clapper sounded in the wood behind her. She held her hand up.

"Listen!" she exclaimed. That's "a cuckoo!"

They listened. They heard the branches creaking; the wind sighing through the trees; but if there was a cuckoo it was silent; the sound did not come again. They moved on in the direction of the lake. It shone ruffled with gold scales as a breeze passed over it. Barred with slender trees, the lake lying beneath them reminded Edward of Italy for a moment. He pointed at it. But the dog began to bark violently. He had rambled off into the bracken and was barking at a couple who lay stretched out under a tree. The man raised himself on his elbow—he was lying with his arm round a woman—and threw something at him.

"Sultan!" Kitty shouted. "To heel, Sultan. To heel!"

They walked on past the lovers, lying stretched out on the grass. The girl's eyes were shut; she did not look up as they passed. But as they passed the man flung himself on the ground again, and Kitty, glancing back, saw that they were locked in each other's arms. It has all begun again, she felt; everyone was making love, everything was broken up, everything was moving on, she felt, as she heard the birds chirp and saw the branches tossing in the spring breeze.

"But you weren't quite fair, Kitty," Edward said, as they walked on side by side. He was a little hurt by something she had said—about Oxford, was it? He loved Oxford, of course, just as her father had loved it.

"But I never knew it," she said. "I left it so young. And it may be different now."

"No, I don't think it's changed," he said.

There was something in his voice, in the look in his eyes as he threw his head a little back, that touched her. After all, he had lived there all these years.

"You have those lovely rooms still?" she said.

"Where your mother brought you to tea," he said. "You wore a white dress," he paused, "with blue spots," he added, as if he remembered it.

"Did I?" she said. "I don't remember." There was some emotion in his voice. Perhaps it was merely the sentiment of the middle-aged about their youth. Or could it be—the thought flashed through her—making a steeple in the distance shine very white—that he was about to ask her to marry him again? A spasm of fear came over her, absurd though it was. No, no, no, she said to herself. No, no, no. And then, just as she used to do when she wished to brush aside something that

was too emotional, she changed the conversation.

"There's my cuckoo!" she exclaimed. She stopped and pretended to listen. He stopped too. A bird was singing, but it was not a cuckoo.

"That's the wise thrush," he said, "that sings each song twice over." He spoke quite unconcernedly. She was relieved, but at the same time ashamed of her folly.

"Does a thrush sing its song twice over?" she asked.

"So the poet says," he observed. It was a quotation, and she had not recognised it. He always made her feel such a boor. That's why I didn't marry you, she said to herself, glancing sideways at his distinguished face—but his eyes were a little near together. Always saying what somebody else had said, she thought.

"I felt such a bull in a china shop," she said aloud; "I mean at Oxford," she added. "And then we married; and travelled, and the children came." She gave a little sigh. It was all over for her now, she was thinking.

"I'm so sorry, Kitty," he said. They had never spoken of her husband's death; but she felt his desire to express his sympathy, and she liked his shyness.

"I'm afraid you've been through a bad time lately," he said.

"So we all have!" she said.

"Yes, yes!" He threw back his head. Many of his pupils had been killed in the War; the young men he had been so proud of. And they had liked him too, she thought, remembering what her sons had told her. They laughed at him; there was some nickname they gave him—she could not remember what—but they respected him. And so did she. They have a standard, she thought as they walked on; people like Edward and Tony. And my father, yes, and old Chuffy. . . . But how different our lives have been! she thought, glancing at him as he walked beside her. She had travelled; she had married; she had borne children, while Edward had gone on year after year at Oxford.

"Tell me," he interrupted, "how's Dominick getting on?"

They talked about her eldest son, who had inherited the place.

"But I don't know if he'll be able to keep it up," she said. "The death duties are so heavy."

"It would be a great pity if he had to leave it," he said gravely.

Again she was irritated. Perhaps she was unjust; but he always brought back the feeling of that small, secure, self-complacent world that she had hated so as a girl.

"I hope it won't come to that," he said, "that he has to leave it."

"The place?" she said. She frowned. Other people were walking there already; seeing her woods, looking at her view. "They'll be forced to sell sooner or later," she said harshly, "like everybody else."

They had come to the edge of the lake. Her dog, excited by the quacking of the ducks, had plunged into the water and was swimming out among the little coveys of birds with great rough strokes.

"Oh that dog!" she exclaimed. "Sultan! Sultan!" she cried, striding to the water's edge and shaking her fist.

He wished she had not brought the dog. It made talk so difficult. But she always had a passion, he remembered, for big shaggy dogs. She's grown rather large, he thought, watching her. He had once thought her a nymph, a shepherdess—yes. He watched her

shouting to her dog. It was extremely difficult now to see what it had been in her that had so fascinated him. He half shut his eyes. He had been passionately in love with her. He could still remember the day. . . . But the dog had clambered out of the water and was shaking himself so that drops flew in a shower all over Kitty's skirt. She shook herself too. She beat him off with her bare hand. He was glad on the whole that he had not married her. She was too rough, too abrupt. But she was extremely vigorous for a woman of sixty. There was something about her vitality that charmed him still, he thought.

"Now you'll get into the car and make us all soaking wet," she said, speaking to the dog as she rejoined him.

And she talks too much to her dogs, he thought.

"I'm so sorry, Edward," she apologised, putting the dog on the chain. "I oughtn't to have brought him." They walked on.

"It wouldn't hurt Dominick to have to earn his living after all," she resumed, trying to return to what they had been saying.

"To earn his living . . ." he said. "But isn't it a good thing," he added, looking about him with his mild blue eyes, "that some people shouldn't?"

She felt that he was not giving the whole of his mind to what he was saying. He was looking about him; he was appraising, appreciating. He was swinging his stick and looking appreciatively at the view. He was getting old, she felt; he was content to take things quietly. How could she ever have thought, for a moment, that he meant to ask her to marry him? He was a scholar; he knew things of which she was ignorant. The soft air blew in their faces; he took his hat off and held it as if he enjoyed feeling the wind in his hair.

"How lovely it is!" he exclaimed, looking at the view.

"Yes," she said rather perfunctorily. "Lovely, isn't it?"

The view had the charm of a landscape in which there is space for different kinds of movement. There were the riders cantering; a troop of boys kicking a ball about; an old man riding on a grey cob, and in the distance a white house among some trees.

"But rather too crowded," she said, "—look at all those cars."

A line of cars moved down the road in the distance like a row of black beetles crawling. They were so distant that they seemed to move very slowly. They were so close that they seemed to make one long line of crawling blackness.

"There's Miles," she said, pointing to a large car drawn up by the grass at some distance. They walked on. She felt as they drew near the car that she had not made the most of her walk with a friend whom she had known so long, whom she saw so seldom. When she had seen him come into the room at luncheon she had said to herself with pleasure, "There's Edward!" but so much time was wasted getting into touch with people; so little was ever said. It was her fault largely.

"I'm so glad you'll be Master, Edward," she said impulsively. "Papa would have been so pleased. He cared so much for the college."

"Yes. What a wonderful book that was of his!" said Edward.

"The history, you mean?" she said. She saw again the ink slowly spreading over the fair page as she made a hasty movement.

"Dear Papa!" she exclaimed. She wished that she had been of more use to him; she wished that she had understood his work better.

"They were very good to me, your father and mother," he said simply, "when I was a young man."

"I think she cared as much for the college as he did," she said. She could see her mother now going up the stairs holding her candle in her hand, and saying, as she opened the door of the spare bedroom, "This is the room where Queen Elizabeth did *not* sleep!"

"Yes, I always see her," he said, "sitting in that low chair working at her embroidery."

They had reached the car. Miles held the door open for them.

"Sultan's been in the water," said Kitty, pointing to the wet dog. "You'll have to put a rug for him to lie on. And where shall we put you down, Edward?" she asked.

"If you could drop me at St. James's Street," he said, as they got in.

Movement and the look of things passing lulled them both; and the comfort of the car after walking. Soon they were crossing Hammersmith Bridge; it was all blue and silver, spring-like, ruffled into little waves as they passed over it; and the eights were out like water-beetles skimming beneath. But they were over it in a flash. At Hammersmith, however, the car was held up. The pavement bobbed with heads that jerked and dodged but remained fixed as if something clogged their feet. However much they bobbed and hooted, both the people on the pavement and the cars in the street remained fixed. The sun beat down on them; there was a slight smell of petrol.

"Soon it'll be quicker to walk than to drive," said Kitty impatiently. Then the car shot ahead. There was a clear run to Kensington High Street, and then again the crowd of women shopping thickened; the traffic coagulated; and they crept at foot's-pace behind an omnibus.

"I always wonder," said Edward, glancing at the great festooned windows, with their gleaming silks and their banners of bright ribbon, "what is the fascination of that particular activity?"

"Shopping?" said Kitty, glancing at a dress in a window. That was the manner, she thought, ironical, polite but slightly condescending, that always irritated her when she was a girl.

"You don't enjoy it?" she said aloud. She looked at the women with their faces pressed against the great plate-glass windows like fish in an aquarium. She had meant to shop too, to buy covers for the chairs in her new house, in Paddington, if he had not asked her to put him down at St. James's Street.

"When I was rich," she said as they passed on, "I hardly ever went into a shop. Now I'm poor, I shop too. . . . I rather enjoy it," she added.

"But my dear Kitty," he began, "I hope . . ." He paused. She knew what he was thinking, and she liked him for his shyness.

"I hope you're speaking," he continued, "in the comparative sense merely?" They had turned into

Kensington Gardens. They were rolling luxuriously past the Albert Memorial.

"Look! The poor Prince is all black," she said, pointing to the bowed figure under the canopy.

Edward raised his glasses and looked at the statue. "And Morris and Eleanor used to swear they'd seen him being gilt!" he said. They left the Prince behind.

"Oh, I'm not poor," Kitty went on. "But I don't want—" she hesitated. "Dominick has a great many calls on him," she said.

Edward bent his head.

"Yes," he said. "It's going to be a question of cutting down everywhere for us all."

Probably he was very generous; he gave away a lot of money to young men, she expected. They were silent. They were driving past the Barracks. A sublime figure in red and silver was striding up and down with a red tuft on his helmet. Little companies of children on ponies were cantering along the Row. Dashing young men with their billycock hats pulled down over their ears went past at a gallop. At the end of the Row, the riders pulled up their horses and turned round. Since it was a fine afternoon cars were drawn up; the green chairs were full of people basking in the sunshine. The swelling flower-beds were thickly planted with blocks of bright-red and yellow flowers. Clouds grained with gold went toppling over the roofs of Park Lane houses, and the windows were spotted with blue and gold reflections.

The season was beginning, and they were held up at the gates of Apsley House to let the cars come in from Hyde Park Corner. Then they too passed out of the gate and swept down the long slope of Piccadilly. And we shall soon part, Kitty was thinking; and how little we've said, she thought. What was he doing? she wondered. Editing something as usual? She glanced at him. He was looking about him, as he had looked at the view in Richmond Park—with approval, with appreciation.

"I was dining with Bankes the other night," he said, turning to her. "You know him, don't you?"

"The Bankes who used to be at the Embassy?" said Kitty.

"Yes. Ralph Bankes. He's over now with his wife."

"The lady with large arms?" said Kitty.

"And a pretty daughter," said Edward. "And when I asked him what impressed him most"—he spoke slowly because he was looking round him, at the clubs, at the Park—"after the War—this was his first visit to London—"

"Wasn't he at the Hague?" Kitty threw in.

"Yes. At the Hague," Edward confirmed her. "He told me that the thing that had impressed him most, when he came back after five years, was—"

The car slowed down. They had reached St. James's Street.

"Oh, here we are," he said. "I'll get out here."

He got out and stood on the pavement with his hat in his hand. He had not finished his sentence.

"You won't come back with me?" she asked. "I've got Eleanor coming?" she suddenly remembered.

"No. I've got to meet somebody. . . . It's been very nice seeing you, Kitty," he said. They shook hands and looked into each other's faces with real affection.

"You'll come and stay with me, won't you?" she

said, "when I'm settled in?" And he bowed.

How handsome she still is, he thought as he turned away. The years had given her another kind of beauty; and she was wonderfully vigorous for a woman of her age. Had she really cared for her husband? he wondered as he crossed the street. Lasswade had always seemed to him an excellent fellow, but rather on the dull side.

The car moved on. The dog jumped across and sat in the seat that Edward had left. Kitty relaxed slightly now that she was alone; but she felt a pang of disappointment as she looked round and saw Edward with his head tilted rather on one side walking down St. James's Street. He didn't even finish his sentence, she thought. What had he been going to say? Something about Piccadilly? Things going on, she supposed. She saw him again, standing in the Park with his hat in his hand looking at the view. She smiled. But I made a fool of myself over that quotation, she thought. The wise thrush . . . what was it the wise thrush did? She shook her head. She had forgotten. And then I thought he was going to ask me to marry him. Well, that's one thing I needn't regret anyhow, she thought as the car turned in to Grosvenor Square. One thing, she said as the car drew up at the door.

The leaves of the door sprang open as if at the touch of a spring, and displayed the black-and-white squares in the hall that always made her feel as if she were stepping across a chess-board.

"Miss Pargiter's waiting in the drawing-room, m'lady," said the footman, taking her things.

"Waiting is she?" said Kitty. She looked at the clock with compunction. She was ten, no, she was fifteen minutes late, and she had kept Eleanor waiting. She hurried upstairs.

"I'm so sorry, Eleanor," she said as she opened the door. She looked round, for she did not see her at once in the large room. Where had they put her? she wondered. Then she saw her, over there by the fireplace in the large chair reading a newspaper.

"I'm so sorry," she repeated as she came across the room. "I've been walking in Richmond Park with your brother."

She kissed her, and then sat down by the tea-table on which a great silver kettle rode, like a ship swinging between two silver stays. Kitty was stiff with her usual shyness for a moment; and noticed the very white gloves that Eleanor held on her knee. But she was wearing her usual clothes; her usual ring; she was the same, now oldish, woman with whom she had broken the swing at Oxford years ago when they were young.

"How nice to see you!" she began. "And then I'm late. But it was Edward's fault. We had to go round by Piccadilly."

"Oh, don't mind that," said Eleanor. "I've been sitting here, in the lap of luxury." She put down the paper she had been reading, and took off her glasses.

"I met him at lunch," Kitty explained, as she fidgeted with the tea things. "And then we went for a walk; I'd not seen him for so long. He tells me," she added, "that he's going to be the new Master."

"He told you?" said Eleanor. "I thought it was a secret."

"So it is," Kitty laughed. "A profound secret—but I guessed."

"But Nigs told me——" Eleanor began.

"Nigs!" Kitty interrupted her. "That was the name! I couldn't remember. Nigs . . . Nigs," she said.

She carved herself a slice of cake and ate like a schoolboy, breaking off great mouthfuls. The dog came up to the table and sat there waiting for his share.

"Nigs didn't like you, did he, Sultan?" said Kitty, tossing him a curl of bread and butter.

"But," said Eleanor, hesitating a little, "I thought nothing had been settled yet." She too felt a little shy; her feeling of dowdiness returned to her. Kitty herself had changed slightly; she was all in black; she was not perhaps so highly groomed as she used to be. They had not met since her husband's death.

"Dear old Nigs. . . . No. It's not settled. But it will be," said Kitty. "How charming he is!" she added. "D'you know what came over me in the Park?" she said suddenly. She looked at Eleanor opposite her. "I thought he was going to ask me to marry him again!" She felt quite at her ease, as if they were girls again. "Wasn't it absurd?" she added.

Eleanor paused.

"I sometimes wish you had," she said.

"No. It wouldn't have done," said Kitty. "And he's done very well without me," she added.

"You made him very unhappy," said Eleanor, looking at Kitty and thinking of her as a girl.

"Did I?" said Kitty.

"Yes," said Eleanor. She remembered how Edward had cried, sitting on the edge of her bed, one night. Kitty stopped eating for a moment. She was surprised, but flattered. She could scarcely believe it; he had always made her feel such a boor.

"What a brute one is!" she said aloud. "How little one knows what other people are feeling!" She was silent for a moment. Then she drank up her tea and lit a cigarette.

"But I like him . . ." she said. "He's such a—what's the word I want?" She waved her hand. "Not 'gentleman'—it's what I feel with you, Nell; and with Martin, when he dined here, when we had a party here, and he said to me, 'What damned dull people you know, what damned bad pictures you have!'" She laughed and waved her cigarette at the portrait of herself over the fireplace. "I like it," she added. They have a standard, she was thinking, feeling largely flattered.

"Trust Martin to say what he thinks," said Eleanor; "especially if it's something disagreeable." She looked up at the picture. She had been looking at it while she waited.

"Who painted that?" she said.

"Oh, I forget," said Kitty, puffing her smoke out. "Thank heaven I shan't have to sit under it any longer."

"You're leaving?" said Eleanor, smoothing out her white gloves on the arm of her chair.

"Yes," said Kitty, "I'm only here tearing things up. There's a lot of things to tear up after thirty-six years. . . . I'm going to live in the country. I've bought a little house in the North . . ." She had a photograph of the house. She wanted to show it to Eleanor. It was a charming house; a little manor house, that had been used as a farm-house. She was going to alter it. But perhaps Eleanor would not be interested.

"It'll be a nice little house when I've altered it," she

said. "Quite small; quite humble. None of this. . . ." She waved her hand at the room, with its innumerable tables, chairs and ornaments.

Eleanor looked round; her eyes rested on an elaborate basket of flowers by the door in which each flower stood separate, as if a wire had been run through it.

"Always made me feel as if I were living in an hotel," said Kitty. "I always wanted to take a knife and scrape it all off. But what was the use? If I altered anything Charles used to come in and say 'Where's Uncle Bill on the old cob?' and back it had to go again," she laughed. It was the first time she had mentioned her husband. Why had she married him, Eleanor wondered, and not Edward? She thought of the good-natured man with the heavy face and the fine drooping eyes who used to march in when she was visiting Kitty and shake hands very cordially, and say "Lest we forget! Lest we forget!" reminding Kitty of some engagement; and then go out again rubbing his hands.

"I expect it looked very nice in the evening," she said, looking round her, "when there were lots of people about." The room had impressed her, as she sat waiting. She liked high rooms. There was an opulence about it. All her senses had seemed to expand as she sat there; with the footmen bringing in silver dishes, and all the papers laid head to head on a round table.

"Yes," Kitty agreed absentmindedly. "It did look nice sometimes, in the evening." In some ways she would mind leaving it, she thought. "But why a fire on a day like this?" she said.

There was a fire burning; and the room with its hothouse flowers was rather warm and sweet-scented. She got up and flung open the window. The noise of the street came in; they heard the rushing of wheels and the hooting of cars at the corner.

"I like big rooms," said Eleanor. She was comparing it with her own rather meagre flat. "I like the sense of space they give one."

"But you'd never come here," said Kitty. She was standing in front of the fire with her arms behind her back like a country gentleman.

"You always made some excuse, Nell, for not coming," she added, smiling at her.

"Did I? Yes. Perhaps I couldn't afford the clothes," said Eleanor, smiling back at her. She stooped and picked up one of the white gloves that had fallen on the floor.

"That's so silly," said Kitty, looking at the white glove.

"Not when you're young," said Eleanor. "When you're young you mind—not looking like other people." She looked at Kitty. She was very well dressed.

Kitty sat down again by the tea-table and took another cigarette.

"How nice it is not to be young," she said. "How nice not to mind what people think. . . . Now one can live as one likes," she added, lighting another cigarette. "Now that one's sixty."

They sat silent for a time, smoking their cigarettes and listening to the hooting of the cars under the window.

"Pity one can't live again," said Kitty suddenly. She held out her hands with the cigarette in them. They were strong hands with short, square-tipped fingers.

"Look at those hands," she said. "I ought to have

been a farmer. . . ."

She got up and strode about the room: she was always restless. She never seemed to altogether to fit in, Eleanor thought. She might be going to say something about her marriage. Perhaps she would, perhaps she would not. She was a queer mixture of candour and reserve. She was still very handsome; she moved vigorously. The dog got up and walked with her. When she reached the door she stopped, as if he expected her to go out. She ought to be walking on a moor with her dogs, Eleanor thought, looking at her. But she came back to the fireplace and stood with her hands behind her back.

"Human relationships aren't very satisfactory, are they?" she said. "It's so difficult to say what one feels." She was thinking of Edward; of their little random scraps of talk; of the sentence he had left unfinished as he stood on the pavement; and how Eleanor said she had made him unhappy.

"Just what we were saying last night," said Eleanor, wondering what she was thinking about, "at dinner."

Kitty looked at her. The words pricked her curiosity.

"Who were you dining with?" she asked.

"Oh, nobody you'd know," said Eleanor. "A foreigner." Kitty felt slightly nettled. She did not mean to tell her, she thought. What sort of people did Eleanor know, she wondered; whom did she dine with? Other people's lives always seem more interesting than one's own, she thought.

"And what did you say?" she asked.

What had they said? Eleanor could not remember. She saw again the smoky restaurant; a parrot in a cage; a girl with a feather in her hat; and Nicholas leaning across the little table, talking.

"Oh, just that . . ." she said. "How difficult it is to know people—how afraid we all are of each other." She stopped. She saw Nicholas touching the fingers of his hand with his familiar gesture.

"Afraid of each other?" said Kitty blankly. It was a new idea to her, it seemed. She considered it for a moment.

"That's true," she said, after a pause. "That's true of me anyhow." I was afraid of Edward this afternoon, she thought, afraid he was thinking me a fool. That was why she had made herself appear more brusque than she was; why she had talked to her dog. "Heel, Sultan! heel, Sultan!" she had said in order to cover up her shyness.

"But is it true of everybody?" she asked. It's not true of Eleanor, she was thinking.

"That's what we were saying," said Eleanor. It was one of the things that they had been saying; but they had said so many other things as well.

"You and your foreigner," said Kitty. She visualised a black man with a beard; the sort of man who wore a red tie. She felt a little envious; it sounded to her as if their evening had been so much more interesting than her evening. She had dined alone with her son and daughter-in-law. They had talked about racing.

"We were saying——" said Eleanor as Kitty waited, looking at her. She could not remember how the argument went. It was very difficult to repeat a conversation; she muddled things up. How had they reached that point about being afraid?

"Dressing up," she said suddenly. "Trying to make

out one is what one isn't," she paused. She was muddling it up. She flicked the white glove on her knee. "Isn't that because we are afraid?" she said. I bought these gloves in order to come here, she was thinking; but they ought to have been yellow.

"And power," she said suddenly, as if she had got her cue. That was what they had been arguing about, she remembered; that was what had started the conversation.

"Power?" said Kitty.

"Yes. People wanting power," said Eleanor; she could remember how it went now. But would Nicholas have been able to say all that here? she asked herself. Her eye rested on the gilt basket of flowers by the door. She smiled. No, she could not possibly tell Kitty what they had been talking about. Power, patriotism, love, sex and all the rest of it.

"But power's what people want," said Kitty. "They'll do any thing to get power."

She saw again the men filing into the drawing-room after dinner, and the women rising like a flock of gulls to receive them. Dear Eleanor, she thought, looking at her. She's very innocent. She hasn't seen as much of the world as I've seen. The thought pleased her rather.

"It's what they live for," she said, throwing away her cigarette. "And after all, it's human nature," she added, brushing away some of the ashes that had fallen on her lap.

"And we can't change . . ." Eleanor began.

"Human nature?" Kitty smiled. "I don't know," she said. "I find it quite hard to give up the little bit of power I had myself," she sighed. It was true. She still felt a lingering desire for the old life that she had disliked so much when she had it.

"No more people being nice to one; no more people making up to one, now that I'm pensioned off like an old servant," she said rather bitterly. Eleanor noticed the little wrinkles, the little hardnesses and hollows in her face that made her look her age as she spoke in spite of her vigour.

"But that's not what I mind," Kitty went on vehemently. "It's losing the place. It's the thought that I shall never walk in those woods again—" The tears started to her eyes; she pulled out her handkerchief, and dabbed them roughly like a schoolboy.

"Isn't it absurd," she said, "to cry for a wood when there's so much else to cry for? But walking with Edward, hearing the pigeons this afternoon—" She blew her nose. That is what she minds, Eleanor thought; not his death.

"That's what I mind," said Kitty. "Anybody can have this—" she waved her hand round the room ". . . all the people who used to come here; the women such fools, and the men only caring for their sport, their politics . . ." She broke off. That's what she minds Eleanor thought, leaving a place.

They sat listening to the dull sound of traffic that came through the open window. Somebody was playing a cornet in the street below; the dismal strain wailed through the air as if a dog had lifted up its head and was baying for the moon. The horns hooted; the cornet wailed; it was disturbing; unrestful. Like a piece of jangled music, Eleanor thought as she sat there listening.

"And what a mess they made of it!" Kitty added, throwing away her cigarette. "What a horrible mess!"

The little clock on the mantelpiece chimed the hour with quick, petulant strokes. Eleanor began to draw on her gloves, pulling the fingers down, for they were new and fitted tightly.

"Well," she said rising, "perhaps the younger generation—"

"No, no," said Kitty. She picked up one of the illustrated papers and glanced at a shiny brown photograph of a race meeting.

"They're just the same—Ann, my daughter-in-law," she said. She pointed to a woman in tailor-made clothes with field-glasses slung round her shoulders at a race meeting. "Just the same," she said. She threw the paper away. She got up.

"But you must come and stay with me in the country," she said, "when I've got my house ready."

She wanted to fetch the photograph, but perhaps Eleanor would be bored.

"It'll be quite a nice little house when I've cut down the trees and dug up the beds. It's a little Tudor manor-house. . . ."

Eleanor had put on both her gloves now and was standing by the window.

"I'll come if you ask me," she said. Kitty stood beside her looking out over the square. "Next spring then—that's a promise," she said. "Spring's so lovely up there," she added. She looked down on the usual stream of business people who were hurrying along after their day's work. It was the crowded hour. The pavement under the trees was dappled with floating shadow; the little figures, foreshortened from this height, looked oddly insubstantial as they went in and out of the floating lights, and the shadows. And all round them were the great ring of houses, red gold in the evening haze.

"How I hate London!" Kitty exclaimed.

"How I love it!" said Eleanor. They both laughed.

"People are so interesting," said Eleanor. "I couldn't, live in the country." She was looking at the man who had been playing the cornet. He had stopped playing and was holding out his cap to each passer-by. Two, three, four people went by without stopping. But the fifth, one of those shabby-looking old women who are always to be seen in London squares, stopped, fumbled in her purse and dropped in a copper. Eleanor smiled.

"I knew she would!" she said, turning round.

"Well, we shan't convert each other," said Kitty, turning away. "And where are you off to now?" she asked, as she walked with her towards the door. "Some Committee?"

"No," said Eleanor rather awkwardly; "nowhere in particular." She won't tell me, Kitty thought. She is hiding her life as we all do. A queer feeling of blankness, of frustration, came over her as she stopped at the door. She broke off one of the hothouse flowers and gave it to Eleanor.

"A flower for your buttonhole, Nell," she said, giving it her.

"But that's a shame . . ." said Eleanor, looking at the velvety streaked petals.

"It'll only die in this hot room," said Kitty. "No, Sultan," she said, pulling the dog back. "You've got to stay with me." She shut the door.

Eleanor made her way down the great staircase. A

large picture with pale-green water and lemon-coloured buildings hung on the wall. Venice? she said to herself. She would have liked to stop and look at it, but there were flunkies lurking somewhere, she supposed; and holding herself rather more erect than usual, she passed on down the stairs. Bright sunshine made an angle across the black-and-white squares. There was some commotion in the hall; a lady was coming in; the footman was holding the door open for a young woman in black. They passed each other in the hall. She was tall and fair and dressed very simply in black. She bent her head with a veiled smile of discreet courtesy as she passed Eleanor, for they did not know each other.

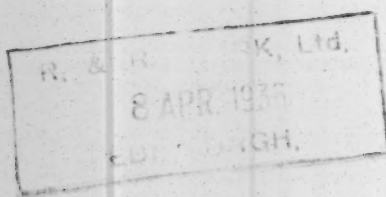
"Ann—the daughter-in-law," Eleanor thought. She recognised her from the picture in the illustrated paper. "The woman at the races," she thought. "But black suits her better," she thought. She was very lovely.

The footman asked her if she had a car. No, and she did not want him to call a taxi; she would walk. She wanted to walk; she felt the need to walk off some little quickening of feeling, caused by,—what? The big room; the staircase; the footman; the lady in black.

Her lips moved as she walked.

. . . dressed in black, just as I came out, very lovely, Kitty's daughter-in-law, she said as she walked on without thinking where she was going. "I went to tea with Kitty," she went on, arranging the story to tell somebody. Yes, I went to tea with her, she said. She went—she'd been walking in the Park with Edward. We talked of Edward. . . . Have I forgotten my bag? she asked herself suddenly. No, she had it under her arm, but she was holding the flower so tight in her abstraction that she did not know that she was also holding her bag. Her lips began to move again as she stood on the pavement to let the traffic go by. We talked about Edward, she said, going on with her story. I don't think that she's very happy. . . . She's restless. . . . She's going to live by herself in the country. . . . A little house in the North.

She crossed the road. There was something that she wanted to tell somebody about Kitty; something that had struck her at the time; something that had seemed to her interesting; but she could not get hold of it in this crowd. Here she came to a shop window in which she saw her own reflection against a mound of some black stuff. So that's what I looked like, she said to herself, putting her hand to her hat. My hat's on one side. Was it like that all the time? she asked herself. She hoped not. There were dresses in the window; evening dresses and muslin summer frocks with ribbons floating, semi-transparent. For the young, she said to herself, thinking how charming they were. Then her gaze rested on a gold-spotted dress with a long skirt. That's the sort of dress I might wear, she thought. I still feel it, she mused. That was the feeling, she thought, looking at the dress; she remembered the feeling of bare arms, and skirts twining round her ankles. That was the feeling, she thought, remembering the old sensation as she came into a room of glitter, of festivity; and she turned to a young woman who was standing beside her, gazing at the clothes. There was something avid, feasting, like the rapture of a butterfly on a flower in the eyes of the young woman, edging closer to the window, sizing up the clothes quickly, and then fastening her gaze on the thin flounced muslin. Yes, that was the feeling, said Eleanor, as if the



girl's feeling had transmitted itself and supplemented her own.

I went to tea with a cousin who lives in Grosvenor Square, she began again. But now she was telling the story to Nicholas, because he was always interested in hearing about other people's lives. A Rigby, she married a man called Lasswade. It's a very big house . . . a great high room full of furniture. . . . But I doubt if you'd have found it easy, she continued, to say exactly what you thought. She smiled, as she remembered her own attempt to repeat the argument. My brother Edward was in love with her, she broke off. Very much in love . . . very much, she went on. He sat on the edge of my bed; he cried. It was in the paper, I think, or I had had a letter . . .

The crowd bothered her. She turned down a back street. There were always dingy streets just behind the shopping streets; streets that were rather empty; streets that were full of warehouses; houses that had been turned into workshops. She glanced automatically into the basements as she walked.

I remember, I read it out, she continued, "Kitty's engaged. . . ." And he said nothing; we were all there. . . . She stopped. There was a man in an apron down in the basement working at a case of type. She watched him. His bare arms were veined and his fingers were knotted, but they were incredibly dexterous. She watched him, fascinated by the way he flicked type into a great box with many compartments; there, there, there; rapidly, expertly; until, becoming conscious of her gaze, he looked up over his spectacles and smiled at her. She smiled back. Then he went on, making his quick half-conscious movements.

She had forgotten what she was saying. She walked on. This is the part of London I like, she thought, looking along the narrow eighteenth-century street where all the houses were let out in work-rooms, in apartments, and yet kept some tinge of ancient dignity. I like this part of London, she repeated. Her tension, her grip she had kept on her flower, on her bag, had relaxed. A fig tree grew out of the basement here; its leaves were beginning to unfurl; its branches spread a wide pattern over the wall. Within she could see women, ironing pink and blue stuff on long trestle tables. She stood and watched them; the irons ran over the crumpled stuff, leaving it pressed out and smooth. The sensation transmitted itself to her own body.

How quickly, she said, as she walked on, one loses the—what do you call it? She meant the tingling, the tension, that she had felt when she came out of the big house, and saw the woman coming across the angle of light in her exquisite clothes. It had become a picture now; she could look at it impersonally. The face was hard, she thought; the eyes glassy, perhaps. . . . What did Kitty say about her when she threw down the paper? She could not remember. But she could see Kitty walking up and down the room with the dog following her. And I thought to myself, she continued, Now she's going to confide in me—But she didn't. . . . The tears came into her eyes though. Yes, that was interesting; her feeling about the woods, the place—"That's what I mind," she said. That's what she minded, she said, turning to Nicholas again; not his death, but leaving the place, down in the country. . . . You may say it's ridiculous, she continued, but then, people are like that. It's human nature, Nicholas! And

if you'd been there, she asked him, could you have spoken perfectly freely? I wonder.

She looked along the street. It was somewhere here that she had dined the night before. It was the foreign quarter. The shops had French and Italian names over them; they sold macaroni; they sold red rubber tubes. It was a dubious neighbourhood. There were people standing at a bar gesticulating. The chairs and little tables in front of doors reminded her of Italy or of France. Children seemed to pullulate. They were playing in the road. They were squatting on doorsteps. A woman came towards her with the swaying movement of a woman about to have a child. She had the suffering, drugged look of a person whose whole energies are absorbed in some physical process. And my mother . . . Eleanor thought, looking at her as she passed. My mother . . . She seldom thought of her mother, but now the brass bed, the sallow picture of the man in uniform, with a high light on his nose, hanging above it, and her mother lying there, came before her. She had ten, she thought. Ten, counting the three who died. And Papa, she thought . . . He had hidden the letters in the long drawer of the bureau, the letters from the lady with yellow hair. What had their relationship been, she wondered—her father's and her mother's? Had they been "in love?" Perhaps. But it was too long ago; too far away; she could not remember her mother, for all the children she had borne! she was a shadow lying there.

That was where we dined last night, she said as she passed a restaurant with bay trees in tubs. There was the grey parrot on the counter; and that was where we sat, she thought, looking at an empty table in the corner. They had sat on and on and on, talking. But I won't dine with you again, she said to herself, seeing him put his hand in his pocket, unless you let me pay my share. It's all very well, she added, to say you're making enough to live on now . . . but I won't dine with you unless you let me pay my share. It was I who ordered the wine. He's so easy in some ways, she thought; so conventional in others. About being nobly born, she smiled. Oh that family, the Poles, the noble Poles, from whom he was descended—how they bored her! But when he talks about what he's doing, about his work in the hospital, she added, then I love him: then we can talk all night. Then she felt, remembering the argument again, the complicated argument, it's like being two minds looking at the same thing from different angles, so that I can tell you any silly little story like this, about going to tea. . . .

A child was running along the gutter; and she guarded it half consciously with her eyes, holding herself ready to dart forward if it ran out into the street; for she heard a car coming. But the car passed; and the child ran on. She roused herself. She looked round to see where she was.

Everything seemed to stand out in sharper relief than usual. It was a fine spring evening. The street hummed with the swarm of people who were walking down the middle of the road. There was the usual barrel organ. The shops were still open; the shabby miscellaneous shops of this foreign quarter; but there was a sense of relief from work; of people standing at their doors, lounging about talking. She felt as if she were abroad—in France, or Italy; in some Southern country where the heat seemed to generate a feeling of

well-being. Even the beggars, she remembered, seem to enjoy life in Italy. It was late though; she was a long way from home.

"Why should I go back though?" she said aloud, looking at her watch. There was still a whole section—she took its measure at a glance—to do what she liked with. Her freedom from ties still sometimes came on her with a clap of surprise. Nobody was expecting her. So I can do what I like, she said, hesitating. How can I make the most of this?—she saw the section; it was roughly four hours. She felt in a mood to enjoy herself. Her mind was full; her being brimmed populous with sights, with sounds, with half realised ideas. She had been talking to Kitty; to Nicholas; then to herself. She had been bringing things together; building up new combinations as she walked; adding fresh ideas to old ones. Every sight, every sound, the man in the basement, the women ironing, the clothes, the people in the streets—all seemed to her to add themselves up easily and naturally. She walked on.

It's not being with people as much as being with them, friendship, she thought, looking at the long French rolls with their crisp crust in a baker's shop, as she passed. Why, then, regret death, the death of the body, or age, if that's true? she said, looking at the loaves; life may be more real when one's not living it? who knows? Except of course, she added, that "I" have to be—the thought slipped her.

"Latest winners," she read on a placard. A great deal of betting went on here. San Toy. Gemini. Star of the East—those are the names of racehorses, she thought. A great deal of betting went on here. These men in shirt sleeves, for example. Who's the Derby favourite this year, she wondered? For it would soon be Derby Day. She had a mind to go there this year with Renny, who had a passion for racing. She found herself in Oxford Street. But I must dine somewhere. Who could I dine with? she asked herself. She had had enough of solitary musing; she wanted to hand her thoughts on to somebody else; so that they could be changed and broken up and given a body to. "Who could I dine with?" she said aloud. She ran over a list of names. Delia was in Ireland; Martin—he would be dining out; Morris had his family; and then and then— She rejected them all for one reason or another. She had left it too late. She stood still in the crowd that pressed down Oxford Street. The sun was setting and the windows were lit. People came by with rosy faces. Some came quickly, as if they had engagements; others strolled lounging and looking about them as if they were merely taking the air; enjoying themselves. The weight of the day was off them! they too, she guessed, felt what she was feeling—garrulous, sociable, inclined for conversation. But how could she stop them and talk to them? It was absurd to let all this stir, potency, fecundity, run to waste, it was pouring past unused. Here was a man with a chip out of his cheek who looked as if he had knocked about the world; he passed! and another, trim, shaven, hollow-cheeked, who reminded her of her brother Morris; a nice man; in some office, she guessed; he passed; and another and another and another, all those nondescript elderly women whose existence puzzled her; and then a woman with bright little eyes, and a great flop of white hair, wearing a sprigged muslin dress under an old fur coat.

Eleanor laughed aloud. Why walk down Oxford Street wearing white tennis-shoes? she asked herself. She looked at the jaunty, disreputable, amusing old woman, pecking her way along the street, rather side-long, capriciously, like a bird on a perch. But she checked her merriment. She wished she had somebody to laugh with. Sally? she thought suddenly. She loved laughing; she was a born mimic. But it was too late, she thought; and she walked on, smiling. And why not laugh, she asked herself. For she had half-blamed Sally for laughing. Why do we always blame the laughers? she asked herself. Why stick seriousness as a label on top of—hats? she added inconsequently; she was passing a hat shop with a flight of hats on rods. Why not laughter? No, I'm not like that, she said, seeing her own reflection in the glass; her respectable elderly woman's reflection. Kitty had ticked her off to her irritation as a woman who sat on Committees, she thought. Where are you off to? Some Committee? she had said. I've done with all that nonsense long ago, she said to herself. But I must dine somewhere. I shall dine by myself; I shall have a good dinner and a bottle of wine, she said, looking about her for a restaurant. But there were only dress shops.

A feeling of expansion, of freedom from surface-marks of identification, possessed her. [That's the advantage of growing old, she thought; as Kitty said; one needn't care what other people think; for they always think wrong—always, always. . . .] It's a good state, age; she thought; as Kitty was saying: one needn't care what other people think: no need to pose; no need to cut a figure any more; one can be oneself. Don't you agree, Nicholas, she asked him, that it's best—she held her hand out, holding her flower, that it's best,—she tried to remember one of his pompous phrases, for he had never got the hang of English; he still used phrases like “exposing the greatest possible surface of the soul”—don't you think it's best, she repeated. Without disguises? She saw him again; touching the outspread fingers of his hands. But he bored her sometimes with his theories: with his ancestors. That she had thought before.

She looked up. When one began to repeat a thought, it was a sign one should change the subject—ask somebody to dine. But who can I ask . . . she began; and then lost the end of the sentence, because the sky above the roofs of the big shops reminded her, with its look of a blue-tinted ceiling, with one plume of fiery cloud, with its aloof alien look, that was so incongruous above the fretted outline of chimneys, of another scene; of the country. She was in the country; walking down a Welsh valley alone. And a little black solitary figure came down the hillside opposite; came nearer and nearer; till they both stopped beside a thorn-tree at the same moment; and said Good day, and stood there talking. He was a builder from Cardiff, she remembered; going to visit his mother who was ill in a farm; and he had written his name on a page of his pocket-book in case she ever came there, and she gave him her name, not liking to feel, as they parted, that they would never meet again.

Which was natural, she said. Human beings like each other surely, by nature—she turned to Renny; don't they Renny? By nature, surely they do? she repeated; turning to Renny, whom she loved, because he always said, “Eleanor, don't be a fool.” He always

said what he thought. Perhaps I could dine with them? she thought. Shall I ring them up? No, she thought, shaking her head as she passed a post-office, when people are so happy they are glad to be alone together in the evening. “Damn that telephone,” he would say; and Maggie, letting fall her socks . . . But she must dine. she was hungry. Here, she said; and stopped short; as if all the time she had been meaning to dine at this very place.

It was a large restaurant; cheerful, opulent-looking. She pushed through the revolving doors. There was an instant buzz and chatter as she came in, which she liked. It at once dissipated all her thoughts. The roar of the street seemed to have found a human voice. Not a word could be distinguished, but there was a general babble of sound. They were all eating, talking, companioned. It seemed as she stood there for a moment, as if she had come in upon a festival already in full swing. But there was no empty seat; all the tables were already taken.

She was about to go up the marble stairs to see if there were a place in the upper room, when, just as she moved, a man at a table in the corner rose and left. She went and took his seat. A waitress leant over the table, swept it clean of crumbs and glasses, and placed a coffee-splashed card in front of her. Then she dashed off somewhere else. What shall I have, Eleanor asked herself, looking at the menu. The three-and-sixpenny dinner? Yes, it saved the trouble of thinking; and she would order half a bottle of wine.

She laid her bag, her gloves and her flower on the table-cloth and waited. She liked the look of the place. Everyone looked festive. On each table an electric lamp burnt red through a tight shade fringed with glass beads. All the faces therefore were tinged with pink light. And everybody was in their best clothes.

There was the usual music; somewhere behind a column they were playing the usual waltz. But it was distant—a pulse of sound merely that surged up and down beneath the clatter. She sat there listening and looking about her, amused, distracted by the many voices, by the many movements all round her. They were very busy; people were coming in and going out. She waited. Gradually she became aware of a thudding sound in the background. She identified it. From where she sat, rather at the back, rather at one side, she could see a swing door opening and shutting. A file of waitresses went in; came out; they went in with dirty plates; they came out with the clean ones. She caught a glimpse of them snatching their dishes from a counter in the kitchens beyond. The machine at this hour of the evening was working smoothly but at full pressure. All the time new diners kept arriving; passing between the tables; coming in; going out. She waited.

She looked about her. At the next table was a couple dining together; a young man and a girl. They had finished one course; and they were waiting too. The girl had opened her bag and was carefully and deliberately powdering her face; then she took out a little stick and reddened her lips. The young man hitched up his trousers and nonchalantly, as if half consciously, ran his hand through his hair as he caught sight of himself in the glass. He might be a salesman in a motor-car business, she thought, and she a girl in a manicure

establishment, for they were both rather lustrous and shiny. And they were both on their best behaviour. “Preening,” Eleanor said to herself with a smile. That is, she added, showing off; acting a part, naturally, she thought, after their day's work in a shop.

Then the *hors-d'œuvre* was dabbed down in front of her—little pink strips of fish and a potato salad. There was not much to it, she thought as she tasted the skimpy food, but it was a change from what one had at home after all. She poured out her wine; she never drank wine when she was alone either. And what, she wondered, as she glanced covertly at the couple at the next table, are they pretending to be? Something gay, smart, up to date and shiny—like the people in the illustrated papers? she wondered. They were neither of them quite at their ease; they were on their best behaviour, curious of people looking at them. She swallowed her *hors-d'œuvre*; it was salty and slippery and not very agreeable. . . . Still. . . . She waited.

How long are they going to keep me waiting? she asked, glancing at the menu. It was a long one. Five courses; *hors-d'œuvre*; fish; meat; pudding; dessert. It might have been better to order one dish and have done with it, she thought. She watched the waitresses hurrying round, half turning as they hurried, to pacify customers who were getting impatient. The swing doors seemed to thud more and more quickly. At last her own waitress, whom she had marked because of her queer pale face and a twist in her mouth, approached, dealing plates as she passed. To Eleanor she dealt a plate of white fish with pink blobs on it. She looked jaded and harassed.

“Very busy tonight?” said Eleanor. She wanted to make her smile naturally.

“Yes'm,” murmured the waitress as she turned, with a little twitch of her lip as if it hurt her to depart from the pursed-up expression which was somehow connected, Eleanor felt, with the weight of the tray she was carrying. It must be heavy—all those dishes, carried in front of one like that.

The music burst out again.

They oughtn't to make her carry all that, Eleanor thought, prompted, perhaps by the burst of music, sentimental as it was, to a sudden rush of pity. They could easily afford, she thought, looking round at the crowded room, more waitresses. They must make huge profits. She began to eat her fish. It was an insipid fish, watery and full of bones. She looked at the menu. We don't want all this, she said, looking at the long list of courses that still remained to be eaten. Why not have one dish; and that a good one? That's what we want; then why don't we have it? she asked, laying her knife and fork down. She pushed away the little pile of skin and bones. Why do they force us to have all this? Why can't we say . . . She yawned slightly. Her mind flagged. She wished that there was somebody to talk to; or failing that, something that she could read. But she had forgotten to buy a paper. She sat there listening to the thudding of the doors; to the violins scrambling over the notes so that they missed the tune. She listened. There was no tune; it was only a scramble of bungled notes.

It was getting hot too. People had begun smoking; the smoke hung down. A weight, made of the heat, and the clatter, and the thud and the music, seemed to be laid on top of her head. She felt as if a headache

were beginning. She put her knife and fork together. She had finished her fish. She had nothing to do but sit and look at her own smeared plate. Her exultation was ebbing.

Though the music continued, the glow, the dazzle and the gaiety were going. The clothes that had seemed at first sight so festive, now seemed, as she looked round her, drab; browns and blacks; almost all the same. At each table there was a respectable middle-aged couple, passively eating, passively waiting. And what was the next course? She looked. Poulet Marengo—some kind of titivated chicken she supposed. Whatever it was, they took their time about it. She opened her bag in case she had something there to read. But she had read both the card and the letter. The card was from Miriam, in Italy. It was the usual picture postcard; great white oxen standing in an olive garden with flaps hanging down beneath their chins; an arch behind them; cypresses, and something scribbled on the top about being back on Saturday and sitting in the sun. She put it down. The letter was from her nephew North, in Africa; but she had read it before. It was a non-committal nephew's letter about sheep; and the drought, and how some man she had never heard of had gone away so that he was alone on the farm. She used to like North, but he had been abroad so long she scarcely knew him now, she thought, as she pushed the letter back into its envelope. She looked blankly at the table before her. There was the silver vase with its one carnation; the pink lamp with its fringe of beads; and the orchid that Kitty had given her, lying among the metal knives and forks on the coarse table-cloth. Dazed by the noise and the ineffective efforts of the orchestra to impose some sort of tune upon the jumbled mass of notes, her eye rested upon the table impassively. Things seemed to lose their meanings. That's an odd assembly of objects, she thought, dully observing the shapes and positions of the things on the table; though they were knife, fork and flower, they had for a moment lost their identity. Black marks on a white ground they seemed to be for a moment; a pattern; something fixed. If there were a pattern, she mused, what would it be? If accidentally scattered objects, were yet in order? If to a mind outside her mind they meant something? as to a painter they meant something? If there were a world beyond this world . . . but the thought slipped.

She raised her hand and beckoned to the waitress; but her waitress had vanished through the swing doors. How would it be, she began again, if this fork, this knife, this flower and my hand—she laid it on the table—were thought together by another mind, so that what seemed accidental—vegetable, animal, metal—were in fact all one? She looked at her hand. There it lay. Then she roused herself. What nonsense I'm thinking, she said, and took up the flower Kitty had given her, and looked at it. It was an orchid, streaked and pouched, with the exotic beauty of those strange flowers. It had a row of yellow dots on its pale-yellow pouch.

She drummed on the table. She wished she could attract somebody's attention. She wanted somebody—anybody—that man reading the paper for example—to take her thoughts and carry them out of this broken darkness into some hard certainty. She tried to hear what they were saying at the next table. But they were

completely silent. There they sat, staring, as if they had ceased to exist, as if they had come to a blank wall, and stood staring at it. Nothing is more depressing, she thought, than the look of people sitting silent over their food. Say something, she felt inclined to cry aloud. Speak!

The orchestra which had faded into silence, now burst into its tune again. They always started with a rush, all together; and the first notes, striking into a rhythm, even though it always petered out, threw her mind on again. Listening to music, even to cheap music, always until it became boring, ran things together. For a moment as she looked at the table; it seemed to her that the connection she had half grasped now ran between the different things; as if she could live from the fork to the flower, from the flower—she put out her hand and touched it—to the spoon. Adventurously, boldly, as you would say, Nicholas, she thought. Adventurously, boldly, she thought, half shutting her eyes; yes boldly, adventurously, since we know so little, about anything is: from the fork to the flower; she smiled. And so, she continued, speaking to herself, and raising her hand to her head conscious as she was of pressure on the top of her head, break up this weight, this unreality, the dumb passivity—she looked at the couple again; they were still staring ahead of them. Break it up? Break it up! she said, tapping lightly on the table. They haven't said a thing to each other for the last five minutes, she thought. Not a thing; and yet here they are having a night out together and they haven't said a thing.

She turned abruptly. Would they never bring her chicken marengo? There was no sign of her waitress. Why was I such a fool as to come here? she asked herself, when I might have cooked my own dinner, at home?

She tapped urgently on the table. It's the only way, she thought; nobody is going to attend to me unless I make a fuss. She tapped again. The man who was reading a paper propped on the cruet near her looked up. She tapped again. And now the waitress came and slapped her chicken down on the table in front of her. She took up her knife and fork hastily and began to eat. But it was not appetising. There was only a rag of flesh on the skinny little bird; and it was luke-warm. It must have been waiting on the counter, forgotten. She had soon finished it. Now she would have to wait again. The next course was what? She looked at the couple next her. They were always a course ahead of her, and now they were eating something whitish out of a metal cup.

"Pêche Melba," she concluded, looking at the menu; that's what it is. But why do they make us have all these courses? Why do they do it? She looked at the menu. The restaurant was owned by a large company; it had branches all over London; there was a list of them. But who are the people who do it? she wondered who is it who makes us eat through a dinner like this? Some rich man? Some company with a rich man on top? A rich man who began very humbly, and then—she had finished her chicken and pushed the smeared plate away from her—like that man whom Celia's always grumbling about—what's his name? The one who built a house; the one who spoilt the view—"but one has to be nice to them because they're so rich"—she could not remember his name. But she could see

him. He walks about like an advertisement of riding breeches, she thought. And they all laughed at him, because he rode to hounds without knowing "the stem of a hound from the stern"—was that the expression? Anyhow they laughed at him. . . . What apes and cats we are, she thought, lifting her glass but the wine was poor; taking his money and laughing at him . . . what apes and cats we are, she thought, for whatever aspect of life presented itself to her seemed at the moment equally sordid; and connected with the smeared plate and the skinny bird. But here her Pêche Melba was delivered. It was a greyish-white mound that slipped about, already half melted, at the bottom of a metal cup.

The couple at the next table had eaten theirs; they had finished; they were going. The young man was paying the bill; the girl was setting her hat straight at her little hand mirror. They were still acting; the young man, as he surveyed his silver nonchalantly was acting some rich man; the girl, arranging her hat coquettishly sideways, was acting some rich girl—some Lady-this-or-that in the illustrated papers. Why must they do it. Eleanor asked herself, lifting her spoon to her lips, when they're not like that? She watched them. As they got up they turned and smiled at each other. When they're so nice underneath, she added. They disappeared through the swing doors.

She swallowed a spoonful of the sweet stuff; but it had a distinct taste of salt in it. She put down the spoon again; it was impossible to eat it. She would get her bill and go. But her waitress had disappeared again. She sat looking about her. In front of her were pillars cased in imitation marble; then there were arches with horse-shoes of fretted woodwork that reminded her of the Alhambra. It seemed to be a combination, what with the plush and the arches of Buckingham Palace and the Alhambra, she thought. There was not a square foot free from ornament of some kind. At one side, in order to cut off the kitchens, there was a glass screen; but even the screen had leaves painted on it. Vine leaves, she said to herself, looking at them. And last year she had been in Italy, and had sat in the courtyard of a little inn under a vine. And the man said to me, she thought, remembering a scene, "Take it," when I admired the jar with olives in it. "It belonged to my wife," he said. And here we have glass beads on pink lamp-shades, she thought, pushing away her metal cup still half full of the whitish-grey liquid. She would pay her bill and go.

She saw her waitress attending to the next table. Two men in bowler hats had taken the seats of the couple who had just left. The waitress had brushed off the crumbs; tidied the table; and was placing the menu before them. Eleanor beckoned to her. Now they're going to eat through the whole of that dinner again, she thought. It irritated her unreasonably that they should be going to eat through the whole of that dinner again. She beckoned. But the waitress was attending to the City men; she saw one of them wink at her as he gave his order. She beckoned. At last the waitress came and totted up her bill. Then she paused; she held her pencil suspended as if to make sure that nothing had been forgotten.

"No, I didn't have coffee," Eleanor said, to help her. "Half a bottle of wine, but no coffee," she said. She watched her adding up the sum. She looked harrassed.

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She still wished, even now at the last moment, to make her smile. The only way would be to give her a larger tip than she expected. She did it; she slipped back a coin, a larger coin than the girl expected. And the girl smiled. She looked at her for a moment as if the heavy weight that had been caused by the trays were momentarily lifted.

She liked me, Eleanor thought, for a moment. Then she added, no, it was my tip. Still, she thought as she made her way out deviously between the many little tables, it was a nice smile, considering she's been on her feet, how many hours?

She pushed her way out through the revolving doors and found herself on the pavement of Oxford Street. It was darker now, and the long avenue with its dipping line of lights looked empty. Only an hour or so ago it had seemed to her teeming with life; sociable, garrulous, hospitable. Now, as she walked, a little wind blew a dirty scrap of paper scraping along the pavement in front of her. And she was alone; the weight of her own being came back to her. There she was, walking along Oxford Street, an elderly woman in no way remarkable, going home, carrying a pair of white gloves. She held the gloves in front of her. It seemed to her ages since she had drawn on those gloves. She had stood at a window, she remembered, looking down, and there was a man playing the cornet; a man with a hat in his hand. And she had turned to Kitty and said, "I like people—they're so interesting." And that was a lie, she said: the kind of lie she hated most; the becoming pose—she who had said that she did not pose. The lie that makes one out a lover of one's kind, she thought. She walked on. And I don't love them, she thought. No, she thought, thinking of the men who had winked at the waitress, I hate them. There they still were, eating. There they all were, staring passively at their food. I despise them, she thought. She stopped. The pavement was stained red with ruby light from a picture palace. There were revolving doors and page-boys with rows of gilt but on their jackets. People were shopping; they were going in. She had half a mind to finish her evening at a picture palace. But she hesitated. Outside hung two over-life-size photographs of film stars kissing. And they, she said to herself, looking at the pouting faces, the curled moustaches, the red thick lips, put Nicholas in prison. She walked on.

She half meant to walk home through the Park. She would go to the Marble Arch, she thought, and walk part of the way back under the trees. But suddenly as she glanced down a back street, fear came over her. She saw the men in the bowler hats winking at the waitress. She was afraid—even now, even I, she thought . . . afraid. Afraid to walk through the Park alone, she thought; she despised herself. It was the bodies fear, not the minds, but it settled the matter. She would keep to the main streets, where there were lights and policemen.

The shops were still lit; they still kept their hats, their clothes on view though the doors were locked, so as to tempt people to buy. People still looked and sauntered; people came tapping past on the pavement. The pavement was barred with stripes of light and darkness. The faces were now lit up, now obscured. The faces, she said to herself—here a group of young men lurched past, bawling out a coarse, defiant song,

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their arms linked together, so that she stepped off the pavement to avoid them—the faces of beasts, she thought, in a jungle.

She walked on. One of the big shops was being pulled down, a line of scaffolding zigzagged across the sky. There was something violent and crazy in the crooked lines. It seemed to her, as she looked up, that there was something violent and crazy in the whole world tonight. It was tumbling and falling, pitching forward to disaster. The crazy lines of the scaffolding, the jagged outline of the broken wall, the bestial shouts of the young men, made her feel that there was no order, no purpose in the world, but all was tumbling to ruin beneath a perfectly indifferent polished moon. For there it hung, the new moon, the lovely slip, cut sharply in the sky. There it hung high up over Oxford Street, as she disappeared down into the tube.

There was a man going past the door of Eleanor's flat, as she stood there in the evening sunlight, crying "Old chairs and baskets to mend." "But North," said Eleanor, turning to her nephew to whom she was bidding good-bye, "you will be careful, especially at the corners?" She had insisted upon coming down all those flights of stairs to say good-bye to him. There she stood with her hair blowing in the wind. North's little sports car was at the door. "Because driving in London," she said, "isn't the same as driving in Africa."

121 "No," he agreed. They stood for a moment looking at the man with his barrow as he trundled it down the street.

"Well, good-bye, Eleanor," he said. "Thanks ever so much." He got into his car.

"Oh but North—" she cried, suddenly remembering something she wanted to say; but he had turned on the engine. He waved his hand to her. The car started off with a jerk. He is not very competent, she thought, watching him. "He doesn't think what he's doing," she said to herself. She gave another wave of her hand as he turned the corner.

"Dear old Nell," he thought, as he turned to wave back to her. "She's just the same. . . ." The car wobbled. She was right: driving in London was not the same as driving in Africa. The car was hired, and the brakes were stiff. He had only been back from Africa for a week, and the lighting system in London puzzled him. There were lights, warnings, beacons, signals everywhere. No, she was right; it was not the same as driving along a straight white road with nothing coming. He pulled up sharp. The red light shone out. Now he had to wait.

"Dear old Eleanor," he thought. She had insisted upon coming downstairs with him; and she must be well over seventy now; her hair was white; thick, still but white. She was just the same: more erratic perhaps; with a room full of people—her little room had been crowded—she had insisted upon showing him her new shower-bath. "You press that knob," she had said, "and look—" Innumerable needles of water shot down. He laughed aloud. They had sat on the edge of the bath together.

But the cars behind him hooted persistently; they hooted and hooted. What at? he asked. Suddenly he realised that they were hooting at him. The light had

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changed; it was green now, he had been blocking the way. He started off with a violent jerk. He had not mastered the art of driving in London.

The noise of London still seemed to him deafening, and the speed at which people drove was terrifying; the cyclists wobbled in and out, and the foot passengers stepped off the pavement at the last moment. But it was exciting after Africa. The shops even, he thought, as he shot past rows of plate-glass windows; the shops were marvellous. They were full of every sort of thing. Along the kerb too there were barrows of fruit and of flowers. Everywhere there was profusion; plenty . . . Again the red light shone out; he pulled up.

332 He looked about him. He was somewhere in Oxford Street; the pavement was crowded with people bustling jostling each other, swarming like bees round the plate-glass windows which were still lit up. The gaiety, the colour, the variety, were amazing after Africa. All these years he thought to himself, looking at a transparent banner of silk, he had been used to raw goods; hides and fleeces; here was the finished article. A dressing-case, of yellow leather fitted with silver bottles, caught his eye. But the light was green again. He jerked on.

He had only been back eight days, and his mind was a jumble of odds and ends. It seemed to him that he had never stopped talking: shaking hands; saying How-d'you-do? People sprang up everywhere; his father; his sister; old men got up from armchairs and said, "You don't remember me? Children he had left in the nursery were grown-up men at college; girls with pig-tails were now married women. He was still confused by it all; they talked so fast; they must think him very slow, he thought. He had to withdraw into the window and say, "What do they mean by it?" But it was amusing to see it from this vantage ground; for he still kept his detachment; he still felt aloof and separate; it still seemed to him, a spectacle. On the whole he did not mean to stay; he meant to look round him and be off again. And then old Nell said, "But we shan't let you go back, North!" She had laid her hand on his knee. Whereupon the little man with the bristling moustache—the chatter still rang in his head—said, "Why not? I wish I had," he said. The red light stopped him again.

337 In spite of the fact that he—his name might be Pickerskill—was one of those well-brushed and probably eminent people who wear wigs; a lawyer;—or was it the Board of Trade?—"I wish I'd done what he did," he said, as if he meant it. That led to an argument. There was another man there, large, with a foreign accent who squeezed lemon in his tea. . . . Who might he be? he wondered. "One of Nell's dentists," said Peggy, wrinkling her lip up. For they all had lines cut; phrases ready-made. "We call him Brown," she murmured. Why Brown, if he's a foreigner, he wondered? Anyhow they all romanticised solitude and savagery, except this man Brown who had said something that interested him. There was the green light—"Go." He shot on again—something that interested him he had said, while the lady with the earrings gushed about the beauties of Nature. He glanced at the name of the street on the left. He was going to dine with Sara but he had not much notion how to get there. He only knew that she lived on the other side of London "near the Prison Tower." He had only heard her voice on

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the telephone saying, "Come and dine with me—near the Prison Tower." But this man Brown—it was difficult to place him at once. He talked, spreading his fingers out with the volubility of a man who will in the end become a bore. And Eleanor wandered about, holding a cup in her hand and telling people about her shower-bath. He wished people would stick to the point and argue things out. Talk interested him. Serious talk on abstract subjects. "Was solitude good; was society bad." That was interesting; but they hopped from thing to thing. When the large man said, "Solitary confinement is the greatest torture we inflict," the meagre old woman with the wispy hair at once piped up, laying her hand on her heart, "It ought to be abolished!" She visited prisons, it seemed.

"Where the dickens am I now?" he asked, peering up at the name on the street corner. In order to get out of the crowd of Oxford Street he had turned up a street on the left. He looked down the long vista. Door after door, window after window, repeated the same pattern. There was a red-yellow glow over it all, for the sun was sinking through the London dust. It tinged everything with a warm yellow haze. Barrows full of fruit and flowers were drawn up at the kerb. The sun gilt the fruit; the flowers had a blurred brilliance; there were roses and carnations and lilies too. He had half a mind to stop and buy a bunch to take to Sally. But the cars were hooting behind him. He drove past the barrow. A bunch of flowers, he thought, held in the hand would soften the awkwardness of meeting and the usual things that had to be said. "How nice to see you—you've filled out," and so on. He had only heard her voice on the telephone: "Milton Street, fifty-three—my name's on the door"—her voice was just the same, but he had only heard her voice, and people changed in fifteen years. Whether this was the right street or not, he could not be sure; he filtered slowly round the corner. Then he stopped; Riley Street, this was. He went on again. This was Milton Street, a dusky street, with old houses, now let out as lodgings; but the houses had seen better days.

"The odds on that side; the evens on this," he said. The street was blocked with vans. He hooted. He stopped. He hooted again. A man went to the horse's head, for it was a coal-cart, and the horse slowly plodded on. Fifty-three was just along the row. He dribbled up to the door. He stopped.

A voice pealed out across the street, the voice of a woman singing scales.

"What a dirty," he said, as he sat still in the car for a moment—here a woman crossed the street with a jug under her arm—"sordid," he added, "low-down street to live in." He cut off his engine; got out, and examined the names on the door. Names mounted one above another; here on a visiting-card, here engraved on brass—Foster; Abrahamson; Roberts; S. Pargiter was near the top, punched on a strip of aluminium. He rang one of the many bells. No one came. The woman went on singing her scales. The mood comes, the mood goes he thought. He used to write poetry; now the mood had come again as he stood there waiting. The woman went on singing scales. He pressed the bell two or three times sharply. But no one answered. Then he gave the door a push; it was open. There was a curious smell in the hall; of vegetables cooking; and the oily brown paper made it dark. He went up the stairs of

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what had once been a gentleman's residence. The banisters were carved; but they had been daubed over with some cheap yellow varnish. He mounted slowly and stood on the landing, uncertain which door to knock at. He stood on the landing, and the woman went on pealing forth long streamers of pure sound. He was always finding himself now outside the doors of strange houses. He had a feeling that he was no one and nowhere in particular. From across the road came the voice of the singer deliberately ascending the scale, as if the notes were stairs; and here she stopped indolently, languidly, flinging out the voice that was nothing but pure sound. Then he heard somebody laughing.

That's her voice, he said. But there is somebody with her. He was annoyed. He had hoped to find her alone. The voice was speaking and did not answer when he knocked. Very cautiously he opened the door and went in.

"Yes, yes, yes," she was saying. She was kneeling at the telephone talking; but there was nobody there. She raised her hand when she saw him and smiled at him; but she kept her hand raised as if the noise he had made caused her to lose what she was trying to hear.

"What?" she said, speaking into the telephone. "What?" He stood silent, looking at the silhouettes of his grandparents on the mantelpiece. There were no flowers, he observed. He wished he had brought her some. He listened to what she was saying; he tried to piece it together.

"Yes, now I can hear. . . . Yes, you're right. Someone has come in. . . . Who? North. My cousin from Africa. . . . the returned wanderer."

"That's me," North thought. "My cousin from Africa." He looked at himself in the glass. "The returned wanderer."

"You've met him?" she was saying. There was a pause. "D'you think so?" she said. She turned and looked at him. They must be discussing him, he thought. He felt uncomfortable.

"Good-bye," she said, and put down the telephone.

"He says he met you tonight," she said, going up to him and taking his hand. "And liked you," she added, smiling.

"Who was that?" he asked, feeling awkward. But he had no flowers to give her.

"A man you met at Eleanor's," she said.

"A foreigner?" he asked.

"Yes. Called Brown," she said, pushing up a chair for him. As if she saw him for the first time her eyes went over his white shirt, his black coat, and then rested on his patent-leather shoes.

"But you've dressed?" she exclaimed.

"Because I'm going to a party," he said. "You've not changed," he added, looking at her. A plain face scarcely changed, he thought, whereas beautiful faces wither. He sat down on the chair she had pushed out for him, and she curled up opposite with her foot under her. He remembered the attitude; she was coming back to him: first her voice; then her attitude; but something remained unknown. It was true, she looked neither young nor old, but shabby, he thought. And the room was untidy—he looked round—or tidied in a hurry, he thought.

"And you—" she said, looking at him. It was as if she were trying to put two different versions of him

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together; the one on the telephone, perhaps, and the one on the chair. Or was there some other?

"I've not changed," he said. Where should he put down his hat? All the tables were littered.

"No: not much," she repeated. "But who's the young Frenchman," she asked, "with the top-hat in the picture?"

"What picture?" he said. He put his hat down on the edge of a table.

"The one who sits looking puzzled with his hat in his hand," she said.

He knocked off a book as he put his hat on the table. "Sorry," he said. Probably she meant that he was slow and clumsy; he always had been.

"This isn't the room where I came last time, is it?" he said. He recognised a chair, and there was the usual piano.

"No. That was on the other side of the river," she said, "when you came to say good-bye. . . ."

"Ah-h-h, oh-h-h," the voice of the singer interrupted. Ah-h-h, oh-h-h," she sang, languidly, climbing up and down the scale on the other side of the street.

"Does she go on like that every night?" he asked.

"Yes," said Sara, "practising her scales." She lay back. The notes coming through the humming evening sounded slow and sensuous. The singer seemed to have endless leisure; she could rest on every stair. And there was no sign of dinner, he observed, though the table was laid. Was he early then? He looked round him for a clock; but there was no clock.

"Why d'you always choose slums—" he was beginning, for children were screaming in the street below, when the door opened and a girl came in carrying a bunch of knives and forks. The regular lodging-house skivvy, North thought; with red hands, and one of those jaunty white caps that girls in lodging-houses clap on top of their hair when the lodger has a party. Owing to her presence they had to make conversation. "I've been seeing Eleanor," he said. "That was where I met your friend Brown. . . ."

The girl made a clatter laying the table with the knives and forks she held in a bunch.

"Oh, Eleanor," said Sara. "Yes, Eleanor—" But she was watching the girl going clumsily round the table; she breathed rather hard as she laid it.

"... Eleanor, gallivanting round the world," Sara added with a wave of her hand. I remember that, North thought. He smiled. Soon they would slip into each other's ways. It was a question, he thought, of getting into other people's rhythms; silence spurt; spurt silence and so on.

"She's just back from India," he said aloud. He too watched the girl laying the table. She stood a bottle of wine among the cheap lodging-house crockery. "It's a good way of growing old," he said, "—never to stay in one place for more than six weeks at a time."

"And wandering about the room," said Sara, "and washing. . . ."

"Sitting on the edge of the bath," he added. "And entertaining the oddest set of old fogies, like your friend—" The girl went out of the room; but she left the door open as a sign that she was coming back again.

"Brown," said Sara, finishing his sentence. "And what did he talk about?" she asked.

"Society and—" he began. But here the girl burst

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stringy disagreeable object which was still bleeding into the well. The willow-pattern plate was daubed with gory streaks. She stretched her hand out and rang the bell. She rang a second time. But nobody came.

"Your bells don't ring," he said.

"No," she smiled. "The bells don't ring, and the taps don't run." She thumped on the floor. They waited.

"She's deaf," she said.

"She has adenoids," he remarked.

"But there was one letter you wrote me," he continued as they waited. "An angry letter; a cruel letter."

He looked at her. She had lifted her lip like a horse that is going to bite. That too he remembered.

"Yes," she said.

"The night you came in from the Strand," he reminded her.

"The night I came in from the Strand," she repeated.

Here the girl came in with the pudding. It was an ornate pudding, semi-transparent, pink and ornamented with blobs of cream.

"I remember," said Sara, sticking her spoon into the quivering jelly. "a perfectly still autumn night; not a sign of fog; the lights lit; and people padding along the pavement with wreaths in their hands?"

"Yes," he nodded. "That was it."

"And I said to myself," she paused, "this is Hell?" he nodded. "We are the damned?" He nodded.

She helped him to pudding.

"And I," he said, as he took his plate, "was among the damned." He stuck his spoon into the quivering mass that she had given him.

"Coward; hypocrite, with your switch in your hand; and your cap on your head—" He seemed to be quoting from a letter that he remembered. He paused. She smiled at him.

"But what was the word—the word I used?" she asked, as if she were trying to remember. "Poppcock, was it?"

"Yes, poppycock!" he confirmed her.

"And then I went over the bridge," she resumed, raising her spoon half-way to her mouth, "and stopped in one of those little alcoves, bays, what d'you call 'em?—scooped out over the water, and looked down—" She looked down at her plate.

"When you lived on the other side of the river," he prompted her.

"Stood and looked down," she said, looking at her glass which she held in front of her, "and thought; Running water, flowing water, water that crinkles up the lights; moonlight; starlight—" She drank and was silent.

"Then the car came," he prompted her.

"Yes; the Rolls-Royce. It stopped in the lamplight and there they sat—"

"Two people," he reminded her.

"Two people. Yes. There was nothing spectacular or dramatic about them," she said. "He was smoking a cigar. An upper-class Englishman with a big nose, in a dress suit. And she, sitting beside him, in a fur-trimmed cloak, took advantage of the pause under the lamplight to raise her hand"—she raised her hand—"and polish that spade, her mouth."

She swallowed her mouthful.

"And the peroration?" he prompted her.

"Time won't wash you out, I said."

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He nodded, as if she had got it right.

They were silent. North had finished his pudding. He took out his cigarette-case. Save for a dish of rather fly-blown fruit, apples and bananas, there was no more to eat apparently.

"We were very foolish when we were young, Sal," he said, as he lit his cigarette, "writing purple passages . . ."

"At dawn with the sparrows chirping," she said, pulling the plate of fruit towards her. She began peeling a banana, as if she were unsheathing some soft glove. He took an apple and peeled it. The curl of apple-skin lay on his plate, coiled up like a snake's skin, he thought; and the banana-skin was like the finger of a glove that had been ripped open.

The street was now quiet. The woman had stopped singing. The trombone-player had moved off. The rush hour was over and nothing went down the street. He looked at her, biting little bits off her banana.

"What does he do," he asked suddenly, "that man who throws his hands out, what d'you call him, Brown?" he asked, sweeping up the broken coils of apple-peel on his plate.

"Like this?" she threw her hands out. "The soul has to grow; the soul has to expand—"?

"Yes. That's the man," he said. "What does he do?"

"I thought he was a friend of yours," he said.

"I love him," she said simply.

But if you love him, "love" him, he thought, blowing his smoke out, how can you say things like that about him, he wondered? He watched her as she got up and set a match to the gas-ring. She was going to boil a kettle for their coffee apparently. He rose too and pushed away his plate with the broken coils of apple-peel on it. He picked up a book that lay on the floor as she stooped over the gas-ring. Was it prose or poetry, he asked himself, looking in. But she was inefficient with her hands; the gas went out with a little pop. She had to strike another match and light it again.

"Read! Read something," she said, looking up over her shoulder. He opened the book again at random. It was poetry; but it was prose too. It was a play apparently. She settled on the arm of the chair opposite him, waiting for him to begin. As he turned the pages, the telephone rang.

"I'm not here," she said irritably. The telephone rang again. "I'm not here!" she repeated. The telephone rang again. "Not here! Not here! Not here," she repeated in time to the bell. She made no attempt to answer it. He could stand the stab of her voice and the bell no longer. He went over to the telephone. There was a pause as he stood with the receiver in his hand.

"Tell him I'm not here!" she said.

"Hullo," he said, answering the telephone. But there was a pause. He looked at her sitting on the edge of her chair, swinging her foot up and down. Then a voice spoke.

"I'm North," he answered the telephone. "I'm dining with Sara. . . Yes, I'll tell her. . ." He looked

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at her again. He laughed. "She is sitting on the edge of her chair," he said down the telephone, "swinging her foot up and down, with a smudge on her face."

Eleanor stood holding the telephone. She smiled, and for a moment after she had put the receiver back stood there, still smiling, before she turned to her niece Peggy who had been dining with her.

"North is dining with Sara," she said, smiling at the little telephone picture of two people at the other end of London, one of whom was sitting on the edge of her chair with a smudge on her face.

"He's dining with Sara," she said again. But her niece did not smile, for she had not seen the picture, and she was slightly irritated because, in the middle of what they were saying, Eleanor suddenly got up and said, "I'll just remind Sara."

"Oh, is he?" she said casually.

Eleanor came and sat down.

"We were saying—" she began.

"You've had it cleaned," said Peggy simultaneously. While Eleanor telephoned, she had been looking at the picture of her grandmother over the writing-table.

"Yes," Eleanor glanced back over her shoulder. "Yes. And do you see there's a flower fallen on the grass?" she said. She turned and looked at the picture. The face, the dress, the basket of flowers all shone softly glowing, melting into each other, as if the paint were one smooth coat of enamel. There was a flower—a little sprig of blue—lying in the grass.

"It was hidden by the dirt," said Eleanor. "But I can just remember it, when I was a child. That reminds me, if you want a good man to clean pictures—"

"But was it like her?" Peggy interrupted.

Somebody had told her that she was like her grandmother: and she did not want to be like her. She wanted to be sallow and aquiline: but in fact she was blue-eyed and round-faced—like her grandmother.

"I've got the address somewhere," Eleanor went on.

"Don't bother—don't bother," said Peggy, irritated by her aunt's habit of adding unnecessary details. It was age coming on, she supposed: age that loosened screws and made the whole apparatus of the mind rattle and jingle.

"Was it like her?" she asked again.

"Not as I remember her," said Eleanor, glancing once more at the picture. "When I was a child perhaps—no, I don't think even as a child. What's so interesting," she continued, "is that what they thought ugly—red hair for instance—we think pretty; so that I often ask myself," she paused, puffing at her cheroot, "What is pretty?"

"Yes," said Peggy. "That's just what we were saying."

For when Eleanor suddenly took it into her head that she must remind Sara of the party, they had been talking about Eleanor's childhood—how things had changed; one thing seemed good to one generation, another to another. She liked getting Eleanor to talk about her past.

"Is there any standard, d'you think?" said Peggy, wishing to bring her back to what they were saying.

"I wonder," said Eleanor absently. She was

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thinking of something else. It was getting difficult to keep her to the point.

"How annoying!" she exclaimed suddenly. "I had it on the tip of my tongue—something I want to ask you. Then I thought of Delia's party: then North made me laugh—Sally sitting on the edge of her chair with a smudge on her nose; and that's put it out of my head." She shook her head.

"D'you know the feeling when one's been on the point of saying something, and been interrupted; how it seems to stick *here*," she tapped her forehead, "so that it stops everything else? Not that it was anything of importance," she added. She wandered about the room for a moment. "No, I give it up; I give it up," she said, shaking her head.

"I shall go and get ready now, if you'll call a cab."

She went into the bedroom. Soon there was the sound of running water.

Peggy lit another cigarette. If Eleanor were going to wash, as seemed likely from the sounds in the bedroom, there was no need to hurry about the cab. She glanced at the letters on the mantelpiece. An address stuck out on the top of one of them—"Mon Repos, Wimbledon." One of Eleanor's dentists, Peggy thought to herself. The man she went botanising with on Wimbledon Common perhaps. A charming man. Eleanor had described him. "He says every tooth is quite unlike every other tooth. And he knows all about plants. . . ." It was difficult to get her to stock to the point—about her childhood.

She looked again at her grandmother's picture over the writing-table. Somebody had said the other day that she was like her. Was she—could she be? She looked at the placid, simpering face of the young woman with a basket on her knee. She too had a small round face; and blue eyes; and red hair. She took out her little glass and looked at herself. Then she took out her powder-puff; then she reddened her lips. She disliked her face; it expressed nothing of what she felt, of what she meant. Still, there it was.

She rose and crossed over to the telephone. What was the number of the cab rank? she wondered. And what a bore it was, she reflected, as she took up the receiver, going to this party; when she had been up all night, and wanted either to sit in her slippers or to go to the pictures. She hated parties; family parties most of all. But what was the number? She was about to call out and ask Eleanor, who was sponging herself apparently, when she saw it written on a strip of paper along with butchers' numbers and grocers' numbers, for Eleanor was methodical in her way.

She raised the receiver. No one answered for a moment. She thought how Eleanor had sat there, in the same position; and had seen North talking to Sara with a smudge on her face. One of these days you'll be able to see the other person at the end of the telephone, she thought. But will one be able to see the picture that the other person's seen before one?

"Number, please," said the invisible voice. She gave the number: then she waited. She saw her own finger-nails holding the receiver.

Efficient, shell-like, polished but not painted, they're a compromise, she thought, between science (she was a doctor) and fashion; they're neither one thing nor the other, she thought: but then, red nails would scarcely—

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"Hullo," said a gruff voice, suggesting sawdust and a shelter, and she gave the address and put down the telephone just as Eleanor came in—she was wearing a red-gold Arab cloak with a silver veil over her hair.

"One of these days d'you think you'll be able to see things at the end of the telephone?" Peggy said, getting up. Eleanor's hair was her beauty, she thought; and her silver-washed dark eyes—a fine old prophetess, a queer old bird, venerable and funny at one and the same time. She was burnt from her travels so that her hair looked whiter than ever.

"What's that?" said Eleanor, for she had not caught on to her remark about the telephone. Peggy did not repeat it. They stood at the window waiting for the cab. They stood there side by side, silent, looking out, because there was a pause to fill up, and the view from the window, over the roofs, over the squares and angles of back gardens to the blue line of hills in the distance served, like another voice speaking, to fill up the pause. They were very high up; too high, Peggy thought. She looked down. It was queer to see cabs turning corners, going round this street and down the other, and not to hear the sound they made. It was like a map of London; a section laid beneath them. The summer day was fading; dusk was falling. The lights were being lit, primrose lights, still separate, for the glow of the sunset was still in the air. Eleanor pointed at the sky.

"That's where I saw my first aeroplane—there between those chimneys," she said. There were high chimneys, factory chimneys, in the distance; and a great building—Westminster Cathedral was it?—over there above the roofs.

"I was standing here, looking out," Eleanor went on. "It must have been just after I'd got into the flat, a summer's day, and I saw a black spot in the sky, and I said to whoever it was—Miriam Parrish, I think, yes, for she came to help me to get into the flat—I hope Delia, by the way, remembered to ask her— . . . that's old age, Peggy noted, bringing one thing after another.

"You said to Miriam—" she said aloud.

"I said to Miriam, 'Is it a bird? No, I don't think it can be a bird. It's too big. Yet it moves.' And suddenly it came over me, that's an aeroplane! And it was! You know they'd flown over the Channel not so very long before. I was staying with you in Dorset at the time: and I remember reading it out in the paper, and someone—your father, I think—said: 'The world will never be the same again!'"

"Oh, well—" Peggy laughed. She was about to say that aeroplanes hadn't made all that difference, for it was her line to disabuse her elders of their belief in science, partly because their credulity amused her, partly because she was daily impressed by the ignorance of doctors—when Eleanor sighed.

"Oh dear," she murmured.

She turned away from the window.

Old age again, Peggy thought. Some gust blew open a door: one of the many millions in Eleanor's seventy-odd years; out came a painful thought; which she at once concealed—she had gone to her writing-table and was fidgeting with papers—with the humble generosity, the painful humility of the old.

"What, Nell—" Peggy began.

"Nothing, nothing," said Eleanor. She had seen the

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sky; that particular sky was laid with pictures; any one of them might come uppermost when she looked at it. This time it was the face of a man in the sea, a foolish, bobbing white face; but she was not going to bring that up. It's time she got over it, she thought, thinking of the rather dull boy, Peggy's brother, who had been killed. She tore up a letter and threw it away.

"Yes," she said, fumbling among her papers, looking for something. "Yes—I don't know about aeroplanes, I've never been up in one; but motor cars—I could do without motor cars. I was almost knocked down by one yesterday, did I tell you? In the Brompton Road. All my own fault—I wasn't looking. . . . And wireless—that's a nuisance—the people downstairs turn it on after breakfast; but on the other hand—hot water; electric light: and those new—" She paused. "Ah, there it is!" she exclaimed. She pounced upon some paper that she had been hunting for. "If Edward's there tonight, do remind me to ask him—I'll tie a knot in my handkerchief. . . ."

She opened her bag, took out a silk handkerchief, and proceeded solemnly to tie it into a knot. . . . "to ask him about Runcorn's boy—who wants to go to college."

The bell rang.

"The taxi," she said.

She glanced about to make sure that she had forgotten nothing. She stopped suddenly. Her eye had been caught by a copy of the evening paper, which lay on the floor with its broad bar of print and its blurred photograph. She picked it up.

"What a face!" she exclaimed, flattening it out on the table.

As far as Peggy could see, but she was short-sighted, it was the usual evening paper's blurred picture of a fat man gesticulating.

"Damned—" Eleanor shot out suddenly, "bully!" She tore the paper across with one sweep of her hand and flung it on the floor. Peggy was shocked. A little shiver ran over her skin as the paper tore. The word "damned" on her aunt's lips had shocked her.

Next moment she was amused too, but still she was shocked. For when Eleanor, who used English so reticently, said "damned" and then "bully," it meant much more than the words she and her friends used. And her gesture, tearing the paper. What a queer set they are, she thought, as she followed Eleanor down the stairs. Her red-gold cloak trailed from step to step. Peggy had to avoid treading on it. So she had seen her father crumple up *The Times* and sit trembling with rage at the head of the table because somebody had said something.

And the way she tore it up! she thought, half laughing and flinging out her hand as Eleanor had flung out her hand. Eleanor's figure still seemed erect with indignation. It would be simple, she thought, it would be satisfactory to be like that, she thought, following her down flight after flight of stone steps. The little knob on her cloak tapped on the stairs. They descended rather slowly.

"Take my aunt," she said to herself, beginning to arrange the scene into an argument she had been having with a man at the hospital, "Take my aunt, living alone in a sort of workman's flat at the top of six flights of stairs. . . ." He had attacked the Victorians. Eleanor stopped.

"Don't tell me," she said, "that I left the letter upstairs—Runcorn's letter that I want to show Edward, about the boy?" She opened her bag. "No: here it is." There it was in her bag.

They came into the hall.

"Ought I to say I'm out?" said Eleanor, glancing at the board of names. "Well, perhaps it doesn't matter." She glanced at the board—the Smiths, the Robsons, the Elliots, were all in or out.

Eleanor gave the address to the cabman and sat down with a jerk in her corner. Peggy glanced at her out of the corner of her eye. She was still a little formidable. "Yes," said Peggy, repeating her words, "he is a damned bully." But her words sounded inadequate.

"Poor wretch!" said Eleanor. "But you see," she added as if she wanted to explain, "it means the end of everything we cared for."

"Freedom?" said Peggy perfunctorily.

"Yes," said Eleanor. "Freedom and justice."

The cab drove off down the mild respectable little streets where every house had its bow window, its strip of garden, its private name—Aberystwith, Balmoral and so on. As they drove on, and got further away into the big main street, the scene in the flat seemed to compose itself in Peggy's mind. She began to make it up, as she would tell it to the man in the hospital. "She suddenly lost her temper," she said, "and took the paper and tore it across—my aunt, who's over seventy." She glanced at Eleanor to verify the details. She was wearing a sort of Arab dress with a veil. Her aunt interrupted her.

"That's where we used to live," she said. She waved her hand towards a long lamp-starred street on the left. Peggy, looking out, could just see the imposing unbroken avenue with its succession of pale pillars and steps. The repeated columns, the orderly architecture, had even a pale pompous beauty as one stucco column repeated another stucco column all down the street.

"Abercorn Terrace," said Eleanor; "... the pillar box," she murmured as they drove on. Why she should refer to the pillar-box, Peggy could not guess. Another door had been opened. Old age must have endless avenues, stretching away and away down its darkness, she supposed, and now one door opened and then another.

"Aren't people—" Eleanor began. Then she stopped. As usual, she had begun in the wrong place.

"Yes?" said Peggy. She could not help being slightly irritated by this inconsequence.

"I was going to say—the pillar-box made me think," Eleanor began; then she laughed. She gave up the attempt to account for the order in which her thoughts came to her. There was an order, doubtless; but it took so long to find it, and she realised that she annoyed Peggy, for young people's minds worked so quick.

"That's where we used to dine," she broke off, nodding at a big house at the corner of a square. "Your father and I. The man he used to read with. What was his name? He became a Judge. . . . We used to dine there, the three of us. Morris, my father and I. . . . They had very large parties in those days. Always legal people. And he collected old oak. He used to show it us after dinner. Mostly shams," she added with a little chuckle.

"How interesting!" Peggy exclaimed. "Do go on, Nell." She felt that she was being shown a picture.

"But what's there interesting about it?" Eleanor asked. "Your lives are much more interesting than mine was."

Then she made a quick movement as if to attract the driver's attention. "Don't Maggie and Renny live down there?" she waved her hand out of the window. "Can't we stop him? Shan't we just go in and ask them—give them a lift?"

"Ask them?" said Peggy. It seemed to her a wild-goose idea—interrupting them when, very likely, they did not want to go to the party. Happily the cab had already passed the street. "Too late, too late," Eleanor sighed. "I should have thought of it before. Only Delia was so anxious. . . ." They were silent again, driving along the bright crowded street. For though the shops were shut, they were still lit up and there were queues forming up at the doors of picture palaces.

"It's the sense of the family," Peggy said to herself, continuing the story of Eleanor that she was telling her friend at the hospital. "They all have it." Seen through his eyes this party was like some ancient monument, grass-grown, scored with half-worn-out inscriptions. It was a way of getting some fun out of it—to decipher these inscriptions; to describe it to him.

"When my Aunt Delia comes to town," she went on, "she says, 'We must have a party.' Then they all flock together—they love it."

She glanced at Eleanor again as if to collect another little fact about her. She was looking out of the window.

"How gay this all is," she said, pointing to the lighted shops. "What pretty clothes people wear nowadays!" She paused. "And the experiment with the guinea pig—how did that come off?" she asked. Peggy was puzzled. "What experiment?" she began. Then she remembered and told her.

"I see. So it proved nothing. So you've got to begin all over again. That's very interesting. Now explain to me once more. . . ."

Peggy explained to her once more about the guinea-pig.

The things she wants explained, she said to her friend at the hospital, are either as simple as two and two makes four; or so difficult that nobody in the whole world could answer them. And if you say to her "What's eight times eight?" She smiled at the profile of her aunt against the window. She wanted to say to her, "Eleanor, what's eight times eight?" and then to see how she would put her hand to her forehead and look puzzled. But that was impossible.

"No: I dare say they wouldn't like turning out at this hour of night," Eleanor said. She had skipped back to Renny and Maggie, it seemed.

"Only it's a way of seeing people one wouldn't see, and now that we're all getting on—not you, us—one doesn't like to miss chances." The words were not the right ones for some reason: Peggy could not use them in her description. It was another proof of her clumsiness about people.

"I'm no good at describing people," she apologised to her friend at the hospital. Some of the things Eleanor said were "like her," but this was not "like her." She had become for some reason illimitable: alive. "She's not that—she's not that at all," Peggy said to herself, making a little dash with her hand as if to rub out an

outline she had drawn wrongly. As she did so, her friend at the hospital vanished. She leant back and looked out at the passing houses. She was alone with Eleanor. Where does she begin and where do I end? she wondered. They were two living people driving across London; two sparks of life enclosed in two bodies; and those sparks of life enclosed in those bodies, she thought, looking at their knees, are at this moment driving past a picture palace. But what is this moment? And what are we? The cab stopped; she stopped also; lost in the familiar problem which she could not fathom, lost in the usual muddle which always disgusted her.

That's why I became a doctor, she thought as the cab moved on. What science knows, it knows for certain; but then how little it knows, how very little, she thought, looking at a lean man in a seedy frock-coat whose dragging foot suggested that there was something wrong with his spinal column. She sighed.

"You're too young to feel that," said Eleanor, patting her on the knee.

"What?" Peggy asked, with a little start.

"About meeting people. About not missing chances of seeing them."

"Young?" said Peggy. "I shall never be as young as you are!" She patted her aunt's knee in her turn. "Gallivanting off to India," she laughed.

"Oh, India. India's nothing nowadays," said Eleanor. Travel's so easy. You just take a ticket; you get on to a ship. . . . What I want to see before I die," she continued, "is some quite uncivilised place. Another kind of civilisation. I was reading a book about Thibet, by a man called—now what was he called?" They were passing the lighted shop windows, and the sight of them seemed to distract her. She looked out.

"Was it that you were so suppressed when you were young?" Peggy asked. "Living with Grandpapa and all that?"

Eleanor turned round with a look of surprise.

"Suppressed?" she repeated. She so seldom thought about herself now that she was a little surprised.

"Oh I see what you mean. . . ." she added after a moment.

For some reason, glancing back at her past, she saw Delia standing in the middle of the room saying, Oh, my God, Oh, my God—and she was adding up—but she must not ramble off again.

"Where's he taking us?" she said, looking out. They had reached the public part of London; the illuminated. The light fell on broad pavements; on white brilliantly lit-up public offices; on a pallid, hoary-looking church. Advertisements popped in and out. Here was a bottle of beer: it poured: then stopped pouring: then poured again. They had reached the theatre quarter. There was the usual garish confusion. Men and women in evening dress were walking in the middle of the road. Cabs were wheeling and stopping. Their own taxi was held up. It stopped dead under a statue: the lights shone on it, giving it a cadaverous pallor.

"Always reminds me of an advertisement of sanitary towels," said Peggy, glancing at the figure of a woman in nurse's uniform holding out her hand.

"But that was the only fine thing that was said in the war," said Eleanor, reading the words cut on the pedestal.

"It didn't come to much," said Peggy sharply.

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The pause seemed to hold them in the light of some thought that they both wished to put away.

"Don't people wear pretty clothes nowadays?" said Eleanor, pointing to a girl with fair hair in a long bright cloak and a young man in evening dress.

"Yes," said Peggy briefly.

But why don't you enjoy yourself more? Eleanor said to herself. Her brother's death had been very sad, but she had always found North much the more interesting of the two. They were silent. The cab threaded its way through the traffic and passed into a back street. He was stopped now by a red light. "It's nice having North back again," Eleanor said.

"Yes," said Peggy. "He complains we talk of nothing but money and politics," she added. She finds fault with him because he was not the one to be killed; but that's wrong, Eleanor thought.

"Does he?" she said. "But then we're all so poor." They were approaching the square in which Delia lived. She began to fumble with her purse. She looked at the metre which had mounted rather high. But he was going the long way round.

"He'll find his way in time," she said. They were gliding slowly round the square. It was dark and the numbers were difficult to see. She waited patiently, holding her purse in her hand. She saw a breadth of dark sky over the roofs. Here and there a star showed, and for a moment the sky had the quiet look of the sky that lies above fields and woods in the country.

"He'll have to turn, that's all," she said. "I'm not despondent," she added, as the taxi turned and went back again. "Travelling you see: when one has to mix up with all sorts of other people on board ship, or in one of those little places where one has to stay—off the beaten track—" The taxi was sliding tentatively past house after house—"You ought to go there, Peggy," she broke off; "you ought to travel: the natives are so beautiful you know; half naked: going down to the river in the moonlight;—that's the house over there—" She tapped on the window—the taxi was gliding tentatively past house after house—"What was I saying? I'm not despondent, no, because people are so kind, so good at heart. . . . So that if only ordinary people, ordinary people like ourselves . . ."

The cab drew up at house whose windows were still lit up. Peggy leant forward and opened the door. She jumped out and paid the driver. Eleanor bundled out after her. "No, no, no, Peggy," she began.

"It's my cab. It's my cab," said Peggy.

"But I insist on paying my share," said Eleanor, opening her purse.

"That's Eleanor," said North. He left the telephone and turned to Sara. She was still swinging her foot up and down.

"Eleanor?" she exclaimed. "I thought it was Nicholas."

"She told me to tell you to come to Delia's party," he said.

"To Delia's party? Why to Delia's party?" she asked.

"Because they're old and want you to come," he said, standing over her.

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"Old Eleanor; wandering Eleanor; Eleanor with the wild eyes . . ." she mused. "Shall I, shan't I, shall I, shan't I?" she hummed, looking up at him. "No, I shan't," she said, putting her feet to the ground, for the kettle boiled.

"You must," he said. For her manner irritated him—Eleanor's voice was still in his ears.

"I must, must I?" she said, making the coffee.

"Then," she said, giving him his cup and picking up the book at the same time; "read until we must go."

She curled herself up again, holding her cup in her hand.

It was still early, it was true. But why, he thought as he opened the book again, and turned over the pages, won't she come? Is she afraid? he wondered. If your nurse dropped you, he thought, glancing at her over the edge of the book, clothes wouldn't fit, presumably, and other children laughed. For example, at the 4th of June . . . He looked at the book again, but he could hardly see to read. She had not lit the lamp.

"I can't see to read without a light," he said. It grew dark soon in this street; the houses were so close. Now a car passed and a light slid across the ceiling.

"Shall I turn on the light?" she asked.

"No," he said. "I'll try to remember something." He began to say aloud the only poem he knew by heart. As he spoke the words out into the semi-darkness they sounded extremely beautiful, he thought, because they could not see each other, perhaps.

He paused at the end of the verse.

"Go on," she said.

He began again. The words going out into the room seemed like actual presences, hard and independent; yet as she was listening they were changed by their contact with her. But as he reached the end of the second verse—

Society is all but rude—
To this delicious solitude . . .

he heard a sound. Was it in the poem or outside of it, he wondered? Inside, he thought, and was about to go on, when she raised her hand. He stopped. He heard the sound of heavy footsteps outside the door. Was someone coming in? Her eyes were on the door.

"The Jew," she murmured.

"The Jew?" he said. They listened. He could hear quite distinctly now. Somebody was turning on taps; somebody was having a bath in the room opposite.

"The Jew having a bath," she said.

"The Jew having a bath?" he repeated.

"And tomorrow there'll be a line of grease round the bath," she said.

"Damn the Jew!" he exclaimed. The thought of a line of grease from a strange man's body on the bath next door disgusted him.

"Go on—" said Sara: "Society is all but rude," she repeated the last lines, "to this delicious solitude."

"No," he said, "I can't."

They listened to the water running. The man was coughing and clearing his throat as he sponged.

"Who is this Jew?" he asked.

"Abrahamson, in the tallow trade," she said.

They listened.

"Engaged to a pretty girl in a tailor's shop," she said.

They could hear the sounds through the thin walls very distinctly.

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"He showed me her photograph," she added.

He was snorting as he sponged himself.

"But he leaves hairs in the bath," she concluded.

North felt a shiver run through him. Hairs in food, hairs on basins, other people's hairs made him feel physically sick.

"D'you share a bath with him?" he asked.

She nodded.

He made a noise like "Pah!"

"Pah." That's what I said," she laughed. "Pah!"—when I went into the bathroom on a cold winter's morning—"Pah!"—she threw her hand out—"Pah!" She paused.

"And then—" he asked.

"And then," she said, lying back in her chair, "I came back into the sitting-room. And breakfast was waiting. Fried eggs and a bit of toast. Lydia with her blouse torn and her hair down. The unemployed singing hymns under the window. And I said to myself—" she flung her hand out, "Polluted city, unbelieving city, city of dead fish and worn-out frying-pans"—thinking of a river's bank, North, when the tide's out," she explained.

"With old cabbage-stalks stuck in the mud," he threw in.

"And perhaps a bloated dog," she added.

"Go on," he said, nodding.

"I put on my hat and coat and rushed out in a rage," she continued, "and stood on the bridge, and said, 'Am I a weed, carried this way, that way, on a tide that comes twice a day without a meaning?'"

"Yes?" he prompted her.

"And there were people passing; the strutting; the tiptoeing; the pasty; the ferret-eyed; the bowler-hatted, servile innumerable army of workers. And I said, 'Must I join your conspiracy? Stain the hand, the unstained hand,'"—he could see her hand gleam as she waved it in the half-light of the sitting-room, "—and sign on, and serve a master; all because of a Jew in my bath, all because of a Jew?"

She sat up and laughed, excited by the sound of her own voice.

"Go on, go on," he said.

"But I had a talisman, a glowing gem, a lucent emerald"—she picked up an envelope that lay on the floor—"a letter of introduction. And I said to the flunkey in peach-blossom trousers, 'Admit me, sirrah,' and he led me along corridors piled with purple till I came to a door, a mahogany door, and knocked; and a voice said, 'Enter.' And what did I find?" She paused. "A stout man with red cheeks. On his table three orchids in a vase. Pressed into your hand, I thought, as the car crunches the gravel by your wife at parting. And over the fireplace the usual picture—"

"Stop!" North exclaimed. "Facts! More facts!" he interrupted her. "You have come to an office," he tapped the table. "You are presenting a letter of introduction—but to whom?"

"Oh, to whom?" she laughed. "To a man in sponge-bag trousers. 'I knew your father at Oxford,' he said, toying with the blotting-paper, ornamented in one corner with a cartwheel. But what do you find insoluble, I asked him, looking at the mahogany man, the clean-shaven, rosy-gilled, mutton-ed man—"

"The man in a newspaper office," North checked her, "who knew your father."

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"Does he?" she said. "But then we're all so poor." They were approaching the square in which Delia lived. She began to fumble with her purse. She looked at the metre which had mounted rather high. But he was going the long way round.

"He'll find his way in time," she said. They were gliding slowly round the square. It was dark and the numbers were difficult to see. She waited patiently, holding her purse in her hand. She saw a breadth of dark sky over the roofs. Here and there a star showed, and for a moment the sky had the quiet look of the sky that lies above fields and woods in the country.

"He'll have to turn, that's all," she said. "I'm not despondent," she added, as the taxi turned and went back again. "Travelling you see: when one has to mix up with all sorts of other people on board ship, or in one of those little places where one has to stay—off the beaten track—" The taxi was sliding tentatively past house after house—"You ought to go there, Peggy," she broke off; "you ought to travel: the natives are so beautiful you know; half naked: going down to the river in the moonlight;—that's the house over there—" She tapped on the window—"The taxi was gliding tentatively past house after house—"What was I saying? I'm not despondent, no, because people are so kind, so good at heart. . . . So that if only ordinary people, ordinary people like ourselves. . . ."

The cab drew up at house whose windows were still lit up. Peggy leant forward and opened the door. She jumped out and paid the driver. Eleanor bundled out after her. "No, no, no, Peggy," she began.

"It's my cab. It's my cab," said Peggy.

"But I insist on paying my share," said Eleanor, opening her purse.

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Nell?" said Peggy, in order to distract her from paying her share of the cab, as they stood on the doorstep. "Ordinary people—ordinary people ought to do what?" she asked.

Eleanor was still fumbling with her purse and did not answer.

"No, I can't allow that," she said. "Here, take this—"

But Peggy brushed aside the hand, and the coins rolled on the doorstep. They both stooped simultaneously and their heads collided.

"Don't bother," said Eleanor as a coin rolled away. "It was all my fault." The maid was holding the door open.

"And where do we take our cloaks off?" she said. "In here?"

They went into a room on the ground floor which, though evidently an office, had been arranged so that it could be used as a cloak-room. There was a looking-glass on the table: and in front of it trays of pins and combs and brushes. She went up to the glass and gave herself one brief glance.

"What a gipsy I look!" she said, and ran a comb through her hair. "I'm burnt as brown as a nigger." Then she gave way to Peggy and waited.

"I wonder if this was the room. . . ." she said.

"What room?" said Peggy abstractedly: she was attending to her face.

". . . where we used to meet," said Eleanor. She looked about her. It was still used as an office apparently; but now there were house-agents' placards on the wall.

"I wonder if Kitty'll come tonight," she said.

Peggy was gazing into the glass and did not answer.

"She doesn't often come to town now. Only for weddings and christenings and so on," Eleanor continued.

Peggy was drawing a line with a tube of some sort round her lips.

"Suddenly you meet a young man six-foot-two and you realise this is the baby," Eleanor went on.

Peggy was still absorbed in her face.

"D'you have to do that fresh every time?" said Eleanor.

"I should look a fright if I didn't," said Peggy. The tightness round her lips and eyes seemed to her to be visible. She had never felt in less in the mood for a party.

"Oh, how kind of you. . . ." Eleanor broke off. The maid had brought in a sixpence.

"Now, Peggy," said she, proffering the coin, "let me pay my share."

"Don't be an ass," said Peggy, brushing away her hand.

"But it was my cab," Eleanor insisted. Peggy walked on. "Because I hate going to parties," Eleanor continued, following her, still holding out the coin, "on the cheap. You don't remember your grandfather? He always said, 'Don't spoil a good ship for a ha'porth of tar.' If you went shopping with him," she went on as they began mounting the stairs, "'Show me the very best thing you've got,' he'd say."

"I remember him," said Peggy.

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"Do you?" said Eleanor. "He was so fond of you when you were small. . . . They've lent these rooms, I suppose," she added as they walked upstairs. Doors were open. "That's a solicitor's," she said, looking at some deed-boxes with white names painted on them.

"Yes, I see what you mean about painting—making-up," she continued. "You do look nice. You look lit-up. I like it on young people. Not for myself. I should feel bedizened—bedizened?—bedizened?—how d'you pronounce it? And what am I to do with these coppers if you won't take them? I ought to have left them in my bag downstairs." They mounted higher and higher. "I suppose they've opened all these rooms," she continued—but they had now reached a strip of red carpet—"so that if Delia's little room gets too full—but of course the party's hardly begun yet. We're early. Everybody's upstairs. I hear them talking. Come along. Must I go first?"

A babble of voices sounded behind a door. A maid intercepted them.

"Miss Pargiter," said Eleanor.

"Miss Pargiter!" the maid announced, opening the door.

"Go and get ready," said North. He crossed the room and fumbled with the switch.

"I'm going to turn on the light," he warned her. He touched the switch, and the electric light in the middle of the room came on. The shade had been taken off, and a cone of greenish paper had been twisted round it. Sara blinked. She was lying back in her armchair with her hands clasped round her knees.

"Go and get ready," he repeated. She did not answer. She pulled the book towards her and pretended to read it.

"He's killed the king," she said. "So what'll he do next?" She held her finger between the pages of the book and looked up at him. It was a device, he knew, to put off the moment of action. He did not want to go either. Still, if Eleanor wanted them to go—he hesitated, looking at his watch.

"What'll he do next?" she repeated.

"Comedy," he said briefly. "Contrast," he said, remembering something he had read. "The only form of continuity," he added at a venture. . . .

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He opened it at random.

"Thescene is a rocky island in the middle of the sea," he said. He paused. A rocky island in the middle of the sea, he said to himself, trying to picture it before he began. There were sea-green pools; tufts of grass; rocks, and far away, waves breaking with a dull roar on the beach. There was a noise behind him. He looked up. Somebody had come into the room. He turned round and stared for a moment as if he had seen an apparition.

"Maggie!" he exclaimed. There she was, in evening dress, standing at the open door.

He jumped up and went towards her.

"We've been ringing and ringing," she said.

"Why d'you trouble to have a bell when it's always broken?" said Renny, coming into the room behind

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"All the time there was a humming and a grinding. The great machines went round; and little boys popped in with elongated sheets; black sheets; smudged; damp with printer's ink. 'Pardon me a moment,' he said, and made a note in the margin. But the Jew's in my bath, I said—the Jew . . . the Jew . . . and I thought of my grandmother, concealing under a muslin handkerchief the wages of a night's sleep with a duke as she came down the marble stairs."

She touched the bead necklace which hung at her throat. "Our pearls," she said. Pawned, he supposed. He waited.

"And that's all," she added. She turned and drank her wine from the glass that stood on the table.

"But the end?" he asked.

"Miss Potts down the passage," she said, pushing away her glass.

"Miss Potts down the passage?" he asked.

"Second door on the right," she continued. "I went in. There she was—Miss Potts—with her air of exquisite competence. A hint of cynicism even. Her nails shone. Her tray was full of corsets—her wire tray, I should say, was full of advertisements of powder and paint. And she said, stirring them with her nib, or perhaps her nails, 'Remember Surbiton, Miss Pargiter. And write without adjectives. About Lady Cynthia looking lovely.'"

"All right," I said, she stretched her arms out and sighed, "—all because of a Jew in my bath—all because of a Jew. . . . That's the story, North," she added.

She lit a cigarette. They sat silent. She felt it, he thought, selecting something from what she had said. Yes, he thought, first there's the voice; then there's the attitude; and then something true. But in what sense true? She was silent. They could hear the Jew thudding about in the bathroom, as if he were staggering from foot to foot, drying himself. Now he unlocked the door; they heard him go heavily up stairs.

"What'll they pay you?" North asked.

The pipes began to give forth hollow gurgling sounds as the water ran away.

"That I don't know," she said.

"And how much was true?" he asked. But she had lapsed into silence.

The house was quiet now, save for the sound of the bath water running away. A watery pattern fluctuated on the ceiling. The street lamps jiggering up and down outside made the houses opposite a curious pale red. It was silent. The uproar of the day had died down; no carts were rattling down the street. The vegetable-sellers, the organ-grinders, the woman practising her scales, the man playing the trombone, had all trundled away their barrows, pulled down their shutters, and closed the lids of their pianos. It was so still that for a moment North thought he was alone, in Africa, sitting on the verandah, asking himself, as he looked at the blue hills with a pen in his hand, how shall I describe—but he roused himself. "What about this party?" he said. He got up and threw away his cigarette. "Eleanor rang up ever so long ago," he added. He stretched himself and looked at his watch. "It's time to go," he said. "Go and get ready," he urged her. For if one went to a party, he thought, it was absurd to go just as people were leaving. And the party must have begun.

"What were you saying—what were you saying,

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"But why were you so late?" said Nicholas, turning to Sara. He spoke gently and reproachfully, rather as if she were a child. He had let her finish her soup, Eleanor observed, before he spoke to her. Now he was helping her to wine. Take care, Eleanor felt inclined to warn her; you're still dazed from the cold; if you drink that it'll go to your head. She was feeling slightly light-headed herself. But Sara drank it. Then she burst out:

"Because of that damned fool."

"Damned fool?" said Maggie. "Which?"

"Eleanor's nephew," said Sara. "North. Eleanor's nephew, North." She held her glass towards Eleanor, as if she were addressing her. "North . . ." Then she smiled. "There I was, sitting alone. The bell rang. 'That's the wash,' I said. Footsteps came up the stairs. There was North—North," she raised her hand to her head as if in salute, "cutting a figure like this. . . . 'What the devil's that for?' I asked. 'I leave for the Front to-night,' he said, clicking his heels together. 'I'm a lieutenant in —' whatever it was—Royal Regiment of Rat-catchers or something. . . . And he hung his cap on the bust of our grandfather. And I poured out tea. 'How many lumps of sugar does a lieutenant in the Royal Rat-catchers require?' I asked. 'One. Two. Three. Four.'"

She dropped pellets of bread on to the table. Then she lapsed into silence. She dramatises things: just as Eugénie used to, Eleanor thought. But she liked her better than usual; she conveyed an impression of bitterness. She had grown older; she was less affected.

"Who is North?" Nicholas asked. He pronounced the word "North" as if it were a point on the compass.

"My nephew. My brother Morris's son," Eleanor explained.

"There he sat," Sara resumed, "in his mud-coloured uniform, with his switch between his legs, and his ears sticking out on either side of his pink, foolish face, and whatever I said, 'Good,' he said, 'Good,' 'Good,' until I took up the poker and tongs," she took up her knife and fork, "and played 'God save the King, Happy and Glorious, Long to reign over us—'" She held her knife and fork as if they were weapons.

"But isn't it natural—" Eleanor began.

But no one answered her. They were silent. Maggie got up and went into the kitchen. I'm sorry he's gone, Eleanor was thinking; he was a nice boy; who wrote poetry; he had just gone to college. . . .

"North is your nephew?" Nicholas interrupted, turning to Eleanor.

"Yes," she said. "A nice boy."

"Where was he educated?" he asked. She told him.

"And after that he went to college?" he spoke, she thought, rather like a doctor, questioning the relations of a patient. Was he a doctor? she wondered.

"Yes," she said. "He went to college."

Here Maggie came in with the meat and began to help them.

"How unfair you are," Eleanor heard Nicholas say, turning to Sara as if they were alone. "Prejudiced; narrow; unfair," he said, tapping her hand with his finger.

"Yes, don't you think it natural?" said Eleanor, turning to Renny. He was sitting there silent. "I remember feeling myself—" she began. For some reason she saw herself again on the terrace; and the maid came out and said that soldiers were guarding the

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line with fixed bayonets; and then she had felt—it was odd how that feeling came and went for no reason whatever: the feeling and the sight.

"Could you allow the Germans to invade us and do nothing?" she said, turning to Renny. The words were not the ones she had meant to use; and directly she had spoken them she was sorry. There was an expression of extreme passivity, or was it anger, on his face? He is French, she remembered. He would not feel what she felt—about England; but what did he feel? Something very strong, evidently; but so contradictory, it struck her, that he could not speak.

"I?" he said. "I help them to make shells." Maggie stood behind him.

"Carve," she said. He was staring at the meat which she had put down in front of him. He took up his knife and began to carve the rather scraggy joint mechanically.

"Now Nurse," she reminded him, as he laid down his knife. He carved another helping.

"Yes," said Eleanor awkwardly, as Maggie went out with the nurse's helping. She did not know what to say; but she wanted to help him; and perhaps it would help him to talk. "That's what I feel myself. Let's end it as quickly as possible and then—" She looked at him.

She felt sorry for him; and fond of him—not that she knew him well. He always frightened her a little; but the wine was breaking down barriers; and the lights; and the sense of being together here in this dining-room after the blue, muffled street. She looked round. "And then—what?" she prompted him. But the others were laughing, and he looked at them as if to take refuge in what they were saying from having to speak himself. Then Maggie came in and sat down to her own dinner.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"I want *him* to talk," said Eleanor. It was true; he interested her; but he shook his head. They listened to what Nicholas was saying. He talked, gesticulating with his hands, which were large and clean, with the finger-nails trimmed very close to the finger-tips, Eleanor noticed.

"So that's what you really said," he was saying. He was laughing at Sara as if they were very intimate. "Poppy-cock; poppy-cock; don't talk such damned poppy-cock," he laughed.

"What's poppy-cock?" Eleanor asked, turning to Renny. She did not know the word.

"American," said Renny. "He's an American," he added, nodding at Nicholas.

"No," said Nicholas, turning round. "I am a Pole."

That explains it, Eleanor thought; I knew he came of one of those races—not Latin, not English.

"His mother was a princess," said Maggie with a smile, as if she were teasing him. He was wearing a seal, Eleanor saw, with a coat of arms on it, hanging from his pocket.

"She was," he said quite seriously. "One of the noblest families in Poland. But my father was an ordinary man—a man of the people. I went to America," he added, "when I was twelve." Eleanor hoped he would go on; but he was silent. The others knew all that, she supposed, already.

"What a mix-up we are," she said, looking round the table as they were silent. "I'm English; Renny's French; he"—she hesitated, by what name to call

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him—" is a Pole. And your mother, Maggie—"

She was looking at a chair in the corner with gilt claws which she connected somehow with Eugénie.

"She was partly Irish and partly Spanish," said Maggie.

"A mix-up, a mix-up," Nicholas repeated, taking her words just as he had repeated "that fit," "that fit" before dinner. Then he looked at his hands and then, as Eleanor knew he would, began:

"And so for what reason do we go to war?"

It was impossible, Eleanor supposed, to keep off the war; but she wished he would, because Renny minded it so much. But he was off; he is one of those voluble foreigners, she thought, half listening, with a theory about everything. Governments want war; people don't. . . . Still, even if he talked nonsense, she thought, watching him touching his fingers, there was something she liked about him; something genial; if effusive.

"So it's for private people like ourselves . . ." she said, filling in a pause; for he had stopped and was searching in his pockets.

"I have brought my own sugar and butter, Maggie," he said, producing a little parcel.

"Oh, that reminds me," said Eleanor. She ought to have remembered that she had brought her butter before. She opened her bag and produced a greasy little parcel. "That's mine," she said, putting her butter on the common plate.

"And that damned humbug," said Sara, "your nephew North, Eleanor, your nephew North, ate all my butter and all my sugar."

"So you must sponge on us," said Renny, pushing the butter towards her.

"So I must sponge on you," she said, helping herself.

"You should have had more self-control, Sara," said Nicholas. He treated her rather as if she were a child, Eleanor thought—a child for whom he was responsible. Were they engaged, or were they not engaged? she wondered. She looked at Sara's hands; there was no ring on them.

"So I should," said Sara, leaning back in her chair. "That's true. But he gave his bridle reins a shake," she murmured, "and said, 'Adieu for evermore, adieu for evermore.'" She sighed, and then she drank again.

"You shall have no more to drink," said Nicholas. He moved away the bottle. That's right, Eleanor thought; wine goes to one's head when one's tired.

"She saw herself," he said, turning to Eleanor, "on top of a tower, waving a white handkerchief to a knight in armour."

"And the moon was rising over a dark moor," Sara murmured, and stretched out her hand and took up the pepper-pot. The pepper-pot's a dark moor, Eleanor thought, looking at it. A little blur had come round the edge of things. She was feeling warmed and soothed; the wine had run things together in her mind. It was partly the wine, partly the War, she thought, which made people intimate. Everything seemed to have lost its skin; to be freed from some surface hardness; even the chair at which she was looking, with its gilt claws and red cover, seemed to radiate out some glamour.

"Did that come from Browne Street?" she asked, pointing to it.

"That chair?" said Maggie. "Yes, it was in the hall. My mother bought it in Venice."

"I remember your mother so well," said Eleanor,

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leaning towards her. "She was"—all her good qualities seemed to come before her, not her bad ones—"so unlike other people," she added. "Everything about her," she said, remembering Eugénie.

"She used to dance," said Sara. She drummed on the table. "When I was young," she hummed, "I used to dance. All men loved me when I was young and used to dance. How did it go, Maggie? Roses and syringas hung, when I was young—when I was young. . . ." She tapped on the table.

"It was a waltz," said Maggie. They seemed to be remembering the same thing: "When I came up to your room after a party."

"A waltz?" said Eleanor. "Yes, we used to dance them."

Renny and Nicholas were arguing about something rather hotly. She turned to Maggie and Sara.

"There was a waltz we used to dance," she said. "How did it go?"

She tried to remember. She began to hum. Sara tapped the rhythm of a waltz on the table. Suddenly a long-drawn hollow sound wailed out.

"No, no!" Eleanor protested, as if somebody had given her the wrong note. The sound wailed again.

"A fog-horn," she said, "on the river?" But as she said it she knew what it was. They were all silent. The siren wailed again.

"Those damned Germans," said Renny. He put down his knife and fork. He spoke with an exaggerated gesture of boredom. Then Maggie got up and said something to her husband.

"The Germans," said Eleanor. She felt an absurd feeling of personal resentment; as if some dull bore had interrupted an interesting conversation. The colours began to fade. It was like a light going out; she was looking at the red chair. It seemed to lose its radiance.

"As you like," said Renny to Maggie; "but it won't make any difference, if a bomb falls on this house. . . ." But she had left the room.

"Maggie likes to bring the children down into the kitchen," he said, rather apologetically. "I'd better help her." He followed her out of the room. The others sat silent round the table. The sirens had stopped hooting. They heard the rush of wheels in the street. Everything seemed to be going past very quickly. They heard feet tapping along the pavement. Eleanor got up and drew the curtains slightly apart. The basement in which they sat was sunk beneath the pavement, so she only saw people's legs and skirts as they went past the area railings. Two men came past walking very quickly; then an old woman walked along, with her skirt swinging from side to side.

"Oughtn't we to ask people in?" she said, turning round. But when she looked back the old woman had disappeared. So had the men. The street was now quite empty. The houses opposite were completely curtained. She drew their own curtain carefully.

"And what about the lights?" she said. She looked at the brightly lit table with the gay china and the lamp hanging over it.

"Oh, they don't matter," said Nicholas. He laid his knife and fork neatly together. She sat down again. "D'you mind air raids?" he asked, looking at her with his inquisitive expression. "People differ so much."

"Not at all," she said. She would have crumbled a piece of bread to show him that she was at her ease;

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but as she was genuinely not afraid, the action seemed to her unnecessary. "The chances of being hit oneself seem so very small," she said. "What were we saying?" she asked.

It seemed to her that they had been saying something extremely interesting, but she could not remember what it was. They sat silent for a moment. Soon they heard a shuffling on the stairs.

"They're bringing the children down," said Eleanor. "Ought we to go and help?"

"No," said Sara. "The children are put in the kitchen; we sit in the coal cellar." She spoke as if there were a regular routine which they had followed often before. "Then Maggie's happy," she added, "because she thinks we shall all be killed together."

"But if a bomb fell on this house—" Nicholas began. As he spoke they heard the dull boom of a gun far away, and Renny came in.

"Bring your plates," he said, "and come and sit in the cellar."

They took their plates and went out into the narrow passage. The basement was dark save for the light of the kitchen fire. As they passed the door, Eleanor could see bundles laid on chairs—the sleeping children apparently.

"In here," said Renny. He turned on the light in the cellar. It was a large cellar; with its crypt-like ceiling and stone walls it had a damp, ecclesiastical look. It was used partly for coal, partly for wine. The light in the centre shone upon glittering heaps of coal; bottles of wine wrapped in straw lay on their sides on stone shelves. The house was very old and solidly built; but the cellar was chilly after the dining-room. It had a mouldy smell, of wine, straw and damp. Renny brought in some hard kitchen chairs.

"Where is Sara?" said Nicholas. Eleanor noticed his anxiety again. She liked him for showing it.

Here she came in, carrying quilts and dressing-gowns which she had fetched from upstairs. Eleanor was glad to wrap herself in a blue dressing-gown that Nicholas handed her. She wrapped it round her and sat holding her plate on her knees.

"And now?" said Sara, holding her plate on her knees. They all looked as if they were waiting for something to happen. Maggie came in carrying a large plum pudding. "We may as well finish our dinner," she said. She spoke a shade too sensibly, Eleanor thought; she was anxious about her children, she guessed.

"Are they asleep?" she asked.

"Yes. But if the guns—" she began helping the pudding. Another gun boomed out. This time it was distinctly louder.

"They've got through the defences," said Nicholas. They began to eat their pudding.

"Is your nurse nervous?" Eleanor asked.

"No, she's got a candle and she's reading a book," said Maggie. She was listening as she spoke.

"What book?" said Nicholas.

"A shilling shocker," said Maggie.

"I should have thought she'd got shilling shockers enough," Renny began, "without—" A gun boomed again; this time there was a bark in its boom.

"Hampstead," said Nicholas. He took out his watch. Then they went on eating again. The silence was profound.

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"This is a magnificent cellar," said Eleanor, looking round, as nothing seemed to happen. It looked as if it had been built to stand a raid; blocks of stone arched over their heads. She noticed a spider's web in one corner. "Perhaps," she suggested, "it was part of the Abbey?" It reminded her of a crypt, of a . . . But another gun boomed. This time the noise was different—a sigh of air rushed up with it. It was right on top of them.

"The Embankment," said Nicholas. Maggie put down her plate and went into the kitchen. Renny rather ostentatiously, Eleanor thought, took another mouthful of pudding. Nicholas looked at his watch as if he were timing the guns. There was something queer about him, Eleanor thought; medical? priestly? Perhaps it was his dressing-gown. She noticed everything more distinctly than usual; the number on the box—1397. The Germans must be very close now. They're overhead, she thought, looking up at the stone arch. One, two, three, four, she counted. She felt a curious heaviness on top of her head as she looked up at the greenish-grey stone. Then there was a violent crack of sound, like a split of lightning in the sky. The spider's web oscillated.

"On top of us," said Nicholas. He spoke as if he were making a scientific observation. They all looked up. There was dead silence. At any moment a bomb might fall.

"That was nothing—turn round and go to sleep," they heard Maggie say in the kitchen. She spoke very calmly and soothingly.

One, two, three, four, Eleanor counted. At any moment now, she thought, looking at the stone, that stone will fall. The spider's web was swaying. A gun boomed. It was fainter—distinctly fainter.

"That's over," said Nicholas. He shut his watch with a little click. They all shifted their positions as if they had been sitting in uncomfortable attitudes. But they did not begin to eat again. Again the guns sounded but they were fainter now.

"They're going towards the Crystal Palace," said Renny.

Eleanor felt as if she too were travelling away in the air towards the Crystal Palace; but at the same time she was sitting in the cellar with a plate of plum pudding on her knee. She looked at the plum pudding, not knowing for the moment where she was. The guns were still firing; but they were further and further away. Maggie came in.

"Well, that's over," she said. "He woke for a moment, but he went off to sleep again," she said in an undertone to Renny, "but the baby slept right through." She sat down and took the plate that Renny was holding for her.

"Now let's finish our pudding," she said, speaking in her natural voice.

"Now we will have some wine," said Renny. He examined one bottle; then another; finally he took a third and wiped it carefully with the tail of his dressing-gown. He placed the bottle on a wooden case and they sat round in a circle.

"It didn't come to much, did it?" said Sara. She was tilting back her chair as she held out her glass.

"Ah, but we were frightened," said Nicholas. "Look—how pale we all look."

They looked at each other. Draped in their quilts

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For a moment a sharp shiver of repugnance passed across Eleanor as if a knife had sliced her skin. But it touched nothing of any importance, she realised; and it explained a great deal. Nicholas was watching her.

"Does that," he said, hesitating a little, "make you dislike me, Eleanor?"

"Not in the least!" she said spontaneously. She had felt many things about him in the course of the evening; she had liked him for this; disliked him for that; but now they all swam together; and liking was uppermost.

"Not in the least," she repeated.

"The one thing I respect him for," said Sara, "they put him in prison for."

"It's all such rot!" Renny exclaimed.

"Didn't I say so?" said Sara. "It's all such rot, it's all such rot." She laughed, imitating her brother-in-law. Then she yawned.

"I shall go to bed," she said. "I'm sleepy."

Eleanor looked at her watch. It was late—later than she expected. She got up, and parted the curtains. The cold winter's night was almost black; it was like looking out into a hollow dark-blue stone. Frosty little stars twinkled over the houses, but they were merely black shapes.

"I'll get you a cab," said Renny, as she took up her coat.

"No, I'll walk," she said. "I like walking in London."

"And we will come with you," said Nicholas. "Come, Sara; here is your hat; here is your bag." He gave her her bag.

"Are you sure you have your latchkey in it?" he asked. She spilt the contents of her bag onto her lap as she sat on the arm of the chair. "Half a crown; two shillings; seven coppers and a threepenny-bit," she counted. "But where's my latchkey? Have I a latchkey, or—"

"Here it is on the floor," said Nicholas, picking up the key and giving it her. "So come," he said.

"But I don't want to come," said Sara. "I want to stay; I want to talk; I want to sing. I want to raise a hymn of praise. . . ."

"Come," said Nicholas. "Come." He took her by the shoulder and pushed her out of the room.

Eleanor went up to say good-night to Maggie. "I should like to stay too," she said. "There's so much I want to say—"

"But I want to go to bed—I want to go to bed," said Renny.

"So you shall," said Maggie, as if he were a child. She picked up the newspapers and began tidying the room.

"Don't bother to come down," Eleanor protested as Renny opened the door for her. But he insisted. He was very tired; he was longing to go to bed, she felt. But all the same he was very polite. Very polite and very rude, she felt. Contradictory somehow. The sort of man, she thought as she went downstairs with him, who feels many different things; and all passionately; all at the same time. . . . But they had reached the hall. Nicholas and Sara were standing there.

"Cease to laugh at me for once, Sara," Nicholas was saying as he put on his coat.

"And cease to lecture me," she said, opening the front door.

Renny smiled at Eleanor as they stood for a moment

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by the perambulator.

"Educating themselves," he said.

"Good-night," she said, smiling as she shook hands.

"Good-night," he said, and shut the door.

That is the man, she said to herself with a sudden rush of conviction as she came out into the air, that I should like to have married. She had never felt that for any of the men who had wanted to marry her; but this was the feeling that she might have felt. And he's twenty years younger than I am, she thought as she walked up the street, and married to my cousin. For a moment she resented the passage of time and the accidents of life which had swept her away from—away from all that she thought with a sudden sense of the evening as a whole. For as she walked behind the others up the dark little street, some things sank; others rose; and it became clear to her that all the evening she had felt one constant and continuous feeling—that it was a happy marriage. Which is rare, she said, very rare.

She looked up. A broad fan of light, like the sail of a windmill, was sweeping across the sky. It paused as if it pondered something; it lit up a fleecy little patch of sky. Then it swept on again; and as it moved it seemed to her to take what she was feeling and to express it, broadly and simply, in a way that was a relief to her feelings. Then she suddenly remembered.

"I'd forgotten the raid!" she exclaimed. She stopped for a moment. Nicholas and Sara stopped too. They were in Victoria Street. There were no signs of anything unusual. The street was perhaps emptier and darker than usual. But there were people walking along the pavement; they emerged for a moment under a lamp and then vanished into the darkness again.

"Will the omnibuses be running as usual?" Eleanor asked.

They looked round them.

"Yes; there is an omnibus," said Nicholas as one of the great forms loomed up through the darkness. Its lights were shrouded with blue paint.

"Then I shall wait here," said Eleanor. They all waited at the corner for a moment.

"Then I shall go," said Sara abruptly. "Good-night!" She waved her hand and walked away. Eleanor took it for granted that Nicholas would go with her. She held out her hand to him.

"I shall wait here," she repeated.

But he did not move. Sara was already vanishing. She did not look after her. Eleanor felt that some inexplicable gloom had come over him. Was he angry? Was he unhappy? She did not know. But here her omnibus stopped beside them. She could think of nothing to say as she took his hand. As the omnibus moved, she looked back and saw him still standing on the pavement. He still had his hat in his hand. He looked tall, impressive and solitary standing there alone. Then she lost sight of him.

The omnibus was almost empty. What passengers there were sat huddled up, silent, shrouded in the blue light, which made them look cadaverous, unreal and spectral. But there was one old man in the corner opposite her who was eating something out of a paper bag. She could not help wondering what he was eating

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The broken words formed on her lips as she hobbled towards the ghostly line of trees. The roar of traffic sounded louder. She could see houses beyond the trees. She was approaching the High Street. Her pale-blue eyes peered forward through the mist as she made her way towards the railings. Her eyes alone seemed to express an unconquerable determination; she was not going to give in; she was bent on surviving. The soft mist was slowly lifting. Leaves lay damp on the asphalt path. The rooks croaked and shuffled on the tree-tops. Now a dark line of railings emerged from the mist. The roar of traffic in the High Street sounded louder and louder. Crosby stopped and rested her bag on the railing before she went on to do battle with the crowd of shoppers in the High Street. She would have to shove and push, and be jostled this way and that; and her feet pained her. They didn't mind if you bought or not, she thought; and often she was pushed out of her place by some bold-faced drab. She thought of the red-haired girl again, as she stood there, panting slightly, with her bag on the railing. Her legs pained her. The long-drawn note of a siren floated out its melancholy wail of sound; then there was a dull explosion.

"Them guns again," Crosby muttered, looking up at the pale-grey sky with peevish irritation. The rooks, scared by the gun-fire, rose and wheeled round the tree-tops. Then there was another dull boom. A man on a ladder who was painting the windows of one of the houses paused with his brush in his hand and looked round. A woman who was walking along carrying a loaf of bread that stuck half out of its paper wrapping stopped too. They both waited as if for something to happen. A topple of smoke drifted over and flopped down from the chimneys. The guns boomed again. The man on the ladder said something to the woman on the pavement. She nodded her head. Then he dipped his brush in the pot and went on painting. The woman walked on. Crosby pulled herself together and tottered across the road into the High Street. The guns went on booming and the sirens wailed. The war was over—so somebody told her as she took her place in the queue at the grocer's shop.

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black because his lordship was dead; Crosby had seen his death in the newspapers. The cars hooted impatiently. People jostled behind her. But Crosby stood still, staring. She took in every detail; Lady Lasswade had a rug over her knees; she was greyer than she used to be, but still extremely handsome; and there was a great dog on the seat. If only somebody had been with her, to whom she could have pointed them out. . . . But here the car moved on; all the cars moved on. Crosby was left staring on the pavement. She kept her eyes on the car as if it were a vision, fading, slowly withdrawing from her sight. She could still see the back of Mr Edward's head; she could still see the great dog on the seat; but now an omnibus came between, and she could see the car no longer.

"It must have been higher up," said Kitty, as the car pulled out and swept smoothly up the hill. "... a little old house with a balcony."

She glanced at the houses on her right.

"We used to drive down and have tea," she said. "There was a lawn that sloped down to the river." Since her husband was dead, and this visit had been with him, there was a touch of sadness in her words; but she spoke cheerfully. There was nothing of the lugubrious draped widow about her, Edward thought. She looked extremely handsome in her black; and her complexion was still white and pink like a girl's; and that pleased him, for they were about the same age.

The car swept on up the hill. Then the houses stopped; and the view opened on the right.

"The view—" said Kitty, turning to look at it.

"The famous view—" said Edward. Down below opened a wide space with a far blue distance of fields, and immediately below on the flat, the river wound, silver, serpentine, set with little boats.

"Where does that come?" said Edward. "In what novel?"

"Dickens?" she said on the spur of the moment.

"No, no, no!" he expostulated, smiling.

Why no, no, no, she asked herself, feeling slightly piqued.

"Haven't an idea," she said. She slipped the rug from her knee and tapped on the glass.

"We'll get out here," she said, and the car stopped inside the Park gates. The great dog bounded out first, and then she got out and told the chauffeur to meet them at another gate. They were going to walk across the Park.

"And I shan't want this," she said, tossing her coat into the car. "It's too hot."

Indeed it was the first day of summer. The trees were sprigged with little green spots; but the leaves were still crinkled, half furled. Here and there a solitary tree rose, like a torrent, a torrent of black iron. But the air was so soft, so gummy, that it seemed as if buds and leaves must be forming even in the black tree under the iron bark. The hum of the traffic now muted, and the distance that lay so blue before them seemed to wrap the whole earth in the softness, the haze of fertility.

The great shaggy dog bounded through the bracken.

"He's enjoying himself," said Edward.

"Yes, he hates London," said Kitty.

The dog had been waiting in the car which had fetched them from the lunch party where they had met.

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"He won't chase the deer?" Edward asked—there were deer feeding at a little distance in the bracken.

"Heel, Sultan," said Kitty sharply, and the dog slunk back to her side.

They walked on briskly in silence. The air carried with it little sounds—of branches creaking, of birds chirping—almost as if they were in the country.

"And you're leaving London?" said Edward, turning to her.

"Yes," she said, "—tearing things up. You can't think," she added, "what a lot there is to tear up after thirty years."

"Is it as long as that?" he asked.

"Well—" she paused, making a calculation, "I was married in eighteen-eighty-five, and it's now nineteen-twenty-one."

"That's thirty—that's thirty-six years!" he exclaimed. "Yes, it's a long time."

They were silent. The air and the movement had done away with constraint at first; but now they both felt a little shy. They had not met since her husband's death the year before. They were walking down a green drive, with a plantation on either side of them. The dog jumped over the palings into the wood. They could hear the dry twigs crackling under him as he leapt about snuffling among the dead leaves. Then horse's hoofs thudded behind them, and a couple on horseback came cantering past.

"D'you ever ride now?" said Kitty, watching the riders lurch up and down in their saddles.

"When I stay with Hugh at the Towers," Edward said.

"He was always a great man on horseback," she smiled. "How well I remember—Tony Ashton, Hugh Gibbs—the three of you!" she paused. "You used to ride together at Oxford," she said. She was silent, as if she were thinking back to their youth.

"Who's at the Lodge now?" she asked, keeping one eye on Sultan. There was a little herd of does in front of them, stepping daintily through the ferns.

"The Antonys still?" she enquired, rather absently for she did not want Sultan to chase the deer.

"Heel," she said sharply. "Heel."

"The Antonys?" said Edward. He seemed a little surprised at her question. "No—he died, six months ago."

"Did he?" she said, keeping an eye on her dog.

"And who's there now then?"

"Nobody," he said, "at the moment."

She detected some self-consciousness in his voice as she watched her dog snuffing about among the ferns.

"You, Edward?" she said lightly, "will they give it you?" He raised his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. She recognised the familiar gesture which made her feel at ease with him. And he was still very handsome; very distinguished-looking, she thought.

"Yes, of course," she said, as if she had suddenly realised something. He was silent. He did not deny it or confirm it. They always keep these things a mystery, she reflected with a little amusement.

"You'll live in the old house where we used to live," she said aloud. "How odd!"

She saw the tree leaning on its prop; and the drawing-room; and her mother sitting there stitching at her embroidery.

"And is there electric—" But she stopped in the

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shouting to her dog. It was extremely difficult now to see what it had been in her that had so fascinated him. He half shut his eyes. He had been passionately in love with her. He could still remember the day. . . . But the dog had clambered out of the water and was shaking himself so that drops flew in a shower all over Kitty's skirt. She shook herself too. She beat him off with her bare hand. He was glad on the whole that he had not married her. She was too rough, too abrupt. But she was extremely vigorous for a woman of sixty. There was something about her vitality that charmed him still, he thought.

"Now you'll get into the car and make us all soaking wet," she said, speaking to the dog as she rejoined him.

And she talks too much to her dogs, he thought.

"I'm so sorry, Edward," she apologised, putting the dog on the chain. "I oughtn't to have brought him." They walked on.

"It wouldn't hurt Dominick to have to earn his living after all," she resumed, trying to return to what they had been saying.

"To earn his living . . ." he said. "But isn't it a good thing," he added, looking about him with his mild blue eyes, "that some people shouldn't?"

She felt that he was not giving the whole of his mind to what he was saying. He was looking about him; he was appraising, appreciating. He was swinging his stick and looking appreciatively at the view. He was getting old, she felt; he was content to take things quietly. How could she ever have thought, for a moment, that he meant to ask her to marry him? He was a scholar; he knew things of which she was ignorant. The soft air blew in their faces; he took his hat off and held it as if he enjoyed feeling the wind in his hair.

"How lovely it is!" he exclaimed, looking at the view.

"Yes," she said rather perfunctorily. "Lovely, isn't it?"

The view had the charm of a landscape in which there is space for different kinds of movement. There were the riders cantering; a troop of boys kicking a ball about; an old man riding on a grey cob, and in the distance a white house among some trees.

"But rather too crowded," she said, "—look at all those cars."

A line of cars moved down the road in the distance like a row of black beetles crawling. They were so distant that they seemed to move very slowly. They were so close that they seemed to make one long line of crawling blackness.

"There's Miles," she said, pointing to a large car drawn up by the grass at some distance. They walked on. She felt as they drew near the car that she had not made the most of her walk with a friend whom she had known so long, whom she saw so seldom. When she had seen him come into the room at luncheon she had said to herself with pleasure, "There's Edward!" but so much time was wasted getting into touch with people; so little was ever said. It was her fault largely.

"I'm so glad you'll be Master, Edward," she said impulsively. "Papa would have been so pleased. He cared so much for the college."

"Yes. What a wonderful book that was of his!" said Edward.

middle of her question; for they had come out of the ride between the trees and stood on a little rise of ground looking down on a silver shield of water. A flight of birds came over in single file; they circled high then swooped low, trailed their legs in the water, and swam along.

"Wild duck!" she exclaimed.

"Yes. Wild duck," he said. "But you never liked it," he resumed, as they walked on down the hill, "Did you?"

"Oxford? No, not as a girl," she said.

She saw again the muslin blind blowing out across the dressing-table, and heard all the clocks striking, one after the other.

"One was so—cooped up there," she said; "I mean as a girl." She sighed. She wished now she had not quarrelled so often with her mother. But she stopped. A musical wooden clapper sounded in the wood behind her. She held her hand up.

"Listen!" she exclaimed. That's "a cuckoo!"

They listened. They heard the branches creaking; the wind sighing through the trees; but if there was a cuckoo it was silent; the sound did not come again. They moved on in the direction of the lake. It shone ruffled with gold scales as a breeze passed over it. Barred with slender trees, the lake lying beneath them reminded Edward of Italy for a moment. He pointed at it. But the dog began to bark violently. He had rambled off into the bracken and was barking at a couple who lay stretched out under a tree. The man raised himself on his elbow—he was lying with his arm round a woman—and threw something at him.

"Sultan!" Kitty shouted. "To heel, Sultan. To heel!"

They walked on past the lovers, lying stretched out on the grass. The girl's eyes were shut; she did not look up as they passed. But as they passed the man flung himself on the ground again, and Kitty, glancing back, saw that they were locked in each other's arms. It has all begun again, she felt; everyone was making love, everything was broken up, everything was moving on, she felt, as she heard the birds chirp and saw the branches tossing in the spring breeze.

"But you weren't quite fair, Kitty," Edward said, as they walked on side by side. He was a little hurt by something she had said—about Oxford, was it? He loved Oxford, of course, just as her father had loved it.

"But I never knew it," she said. "I left it so young. And it may be different now."

"No, I don't think it's changed," he said.

There was something in his voice, in the look in his eyes as he threw his head a little back, that touched her. After all, he had lived there all these years.

"You have those lovely rooms still?" she said.

"Where your mother brought you to tea," he said.

"You wore a white dress," he paused, "with blue spots," he added, as if he remembered it.

"Did I?" she said. "I don't remember." There was some emotion in his voice. Perhaps it was merely the sentiment of the middle-aged about their youth. Or could it be—the thought flashed through her—making a steeple in the distance shine very white—that he was about to ask her to marry him again? A spasm of fear came over her, absurd though it was. No, no, no, she said to herself. No, no, no. And then, just as she used to do when she wished to brush aside something that

was too emotional, she changed the conversation.

"There's my cuckoo!" she exclaimed. She stopped and pretended to listen. He stopped too. A bird was singing, but it was not a cuckoo.

"That's the wise thrush," he said, "that sings each song twice over." He spoke quite unconcernedly. She was relieved, but at the same time ashamed of her folly.

"Does a thrush sing its song twice over?" she asked.

"So the poet says," he observed. It was a quotation, and she had not recognised it. He always made her feel such a boor. That's why I didn't marry you, she said to herself, glancing sideways at his distinguished face—but his eyes were a little near together. Always saying what somebody else had said, she thought.

"I felt such a bull in a china shop," she said aloud; "I mean at Oxford," she added. "And then we married; and travelled, and the children came." She gave a little sigh. It was all over for her now, she was thinking.

"I'm so sorry, Kitty," he said. They had never spoken of her husband's death; but she felt his desire to express his sympathy, and she liked his shyness.

"I'm afraid you've been through a bad time lately," he said.

"So we all have!" she said.

"Yes, yes!" He threw back his head. Many of his pupils had been killed in the War; the young men he had been so proud of. And they had liked him too, she thought, remembering what her sons had told her. They laughed at him; there was some nickname they gave him—she could not remember what—but they respected him. And so did she. They have a standard, she thought as they walked on; people like Edward and Tony. And my father, yes, and old Chuffy. . . . But how different our lives have been! she thought, glancing at him as he walked beside her. She had travelled; she had married; she had borne children, while Edward had gone on year after year at Oxford.

"Tell me," he interrupted, "how's Dominick getting on?"

They talked about her eldest son, who had inherited the place.

"But I don't know if he'll be able to keep it up," she said. "The death duties are so heavy."

"It would be a great pity if he had to leave it," he said gravely.

Again she was irritated. Perhaps she was unjust; but he always brought back the feeling of that small, secure, self-complacent world that she had hated so as a girl.

"I hope it won't come to that," he said, "that he has to leave it."

"The place?" she said. She frowned. Other people were walking there already; seeing her woods, looking at her view. "They'll be forced to sell sooner or later," she said harshly, "like everybody else."

They had come to the edge of the lake. Her dog, excited by the quacking of the ducks, had plunged into the water and was swimming out among the little coveys of birds with great rough strokes.

"Oh that dog!" she exclaimed. "Sultan! Sultan!" she cried, striding to the water's edge and shaking her fist.

He wished she had not brought the dog. It made talk so difficult. But she always had a passion, he remembered, for big shaggy dogs. She's grown rather large, he thought, watching her. He had once thought her a nymph, a shepherdess—yes. He watched her

shouting to her dog. It was extremely difficult now to see what it had been in her that had so fascinated him. He half shut his eyes. He had been passionately in love with her. He could still remember the day. . . . But the dog had clambered out of the water and was shaking himself so that drops flew in a shower all over Kitty's skirt. She shook herself too. She beat him off with her bare hand. He was glad on the whole that he had not married her. She was too rough, too abrupt. But she was extremely vigorous for a woman of sixty. There was something about her vitality that charmed him still, he thought.

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"Yes. What a wonderful book that was of his!" said Edward.

"The history, you mean?" she said. She saw again the ink slowly spreading over the fair page as she made a hasty movement.

"Dear Papa!" she exclaimed. She wished that she had been of more use to him; she wished that she had understood his work better.

"They were very good to me, your father and mother," he said simply, "when I was a young man."

"I think she cared as much for the college as he did," she said. She could see her mother now going up the stairs holding her candle in her hand, and saying, as she opened the door of the spare bedroom, "This is the room where Queen Elizabeth did *not* sleep!"

"Yes, I always see her," he said, "sitting in that low chair working at her embroidery."

They had reached the car. Miles held the door open for them.

"Sultan's been in the water," said Kitty, pointing to the wet dog. "You'll have to put a rug for him to lie on. And where shall we put you down, Edward?" she asked.

"If you could drop me at St. James's Street," he said, as they got in.

Movement and the look of things passing lulled them both; and the comfort of the car after walking. Soon they were crossing Hammersmith Bridge; it was all blue and silver, spring-like, ruffled into little waves as they passed over it; and the eights were out like water-beetles skimming beneath. But they were over it in a flash. At Hammersmith, however, the car was held up. The pavement bobbed with heads that jerked and dodged but remained fixed as if something clogged their feet. However much they bobbed and hooted, both the people on the pavement and the cars in the street remained fixed. The sun beat down on them; there was a slight smell of petrol.

"Soon it'll be quicker to walk than to drive," said Kitty impatiently. Then the car shot ahead. There was a clear run to Kensington High Street, and then again the crowd of women shopping thickened; the traffic coagulated; and they crept at foot's-pace behind an omnibus.

"I always wonder," said Edward, glancing at the great festooned windows, with their gleaming silks and their banners of bright ribbon, "what is the fascination of that particular activity?"

"Shopping?" said Kitty, glancing at a dress in a window. That was the manner, she thought, ironical, polite but slightly condescending, that always irritated her when she was a girl.

"You don't enjoy it?" she said aloud. She looked at the women with their faces pressed against the great plate-glass windows like fish in an aquarium. She had meant to shop too, to buy covers for the chairs in her new house, in Paddington, if he had not asked her to put him down at St. James's Street.

"When I was rich," she said as they passed on, "I hardly ever went into a shop. Now I'm poor, I shop too. . . . I rather enjoy it," she added.

"But my dear Kitty," he began, "I hope . . ." He paused. She knew what he was thinking, and she liked him for his shyness.

"I hope you're speaking," he continued, "in the comparative sense merely?" They had turned into

Kensington Gardens. They were rolling luxuriously past the Albert Memorial.

"Look! The poor Prince is all black," she said, pointing to the bowed figure under the canopy.

Edward raised his glasses and looked at the statue. "And Morris and Eleanor used to swear they'd seen him being gilt!" he said. They left the Prince behind.

"Oh, I'm not poor," Kitty went on. "But I don't want—" she hesitated. "Dominick has a great many calls on him," she said.

Edward bent his head.

"Yes," he said. "It's going to be a question of cutting down everywhere for us all."

Probably he was very generous; he gave away a lot of money to young men, she expected. They were silent. They were driving past the Barracks. A sublime figure in red and silver was striding up and down with a red tuft on his helmet. Little companies of children on ponies were cantering along the Row. Dashing young men with their billycock hats pulled down over their ears went past at a gallop. At the end of the Row, the riders pulled up their horses and turned round. Since it was a fine afternoon cars were drawn up; the green chairs were full of people basking in the sunshine. The swelling flower-beds were thickly planted with blocks of bright-red and yellow flowers. Clouds grained with gold went toppling over the roofs of Park Lane houses, and the windows were spotted with blue and gold reflections.

The season was beginning, and they were held up at the gates of Apsley House to let the cars come in from Hyde Park Corner. Then they too passed out of the gate and swept down the long slope of Piccadilly. And we shall soon part, Kitty was thinking; and how little we've said, she thought. What was he doing? she wondered. Editing something as usual? She glanced at him. He was looking about him, as he had looked at the view in Richmond Park—with approval, with appreciation.

"I was dining with Bankes the other night," he said, turning to her. "You know him, don't you?"

"The Bankes who used to be at the Embassy?" said Kitty.

"Yes. Ralph Bankes. He's over now with his wife."

"The lady with large arms?" said Kitty.

"And a pretty daughter," said Edward. "And when I asked him what impressed him most"—he spoke slowly because he was looking round him, at the clubs, at the Park—"after the War—this was his first visit to London—"

"Wasn't he at the Hague?" Kitty threw in.

"Yes. At the Hague," Edward confirmed her. "He told me that the thing that had impressed him most, when he came back after five years, was—"

The car slowed down. They had reached St. James's Street.

"Oh, here we are," he said. "I'll get out here."

He got out and stood on the pavement with his hat in his hand. He had not finished his sentence.

"You won't come back with me?" she asked. "I've got Eleanor coming?" she suddenly remembered.

"No. I've got to meet somebody. . . . It's been very nice seeing you, Kitty," he said. They shook hands and looked into each other's faces with real affection.

"You'll come and stay with me, won't you?" she

said, "when I'm settled in?" And he bowed.

How handsome she still is, he thought as he turned away. The years had given her another kind of beauty; and she was wonderfully vigorous for a woman of her age. Had she really cared for her husband? he wondered as he crossed the street. Lasswade had always seemed to him an excellent fellow, but rather on the dull side.

The car moved on. The dog jumped across and sat in the seat that Edward had left. Kitty relaxed slightly now that she was alone; but she felt a pang of disappointment as she looked round and saw Edward with his head tilted rather on one side walking down St. James's Street. He didn't even finish his sentence, she thought. What had he been going to say? Something about Piccadilly? Things going on, she supposed. She saw him again, standing in the Park with his hat in his hand looking at the view. She smiled. But I made a fool of myself over that quotation, she thought. The wise thrush . . . what was it the wise thrush did? She shook her head. She had forgotten. And then I thought he was going to ask me to marry him. Well, that's one thing I needn't regret anyhow, she thought as the car turned in to Grosvenor Square. One thing, she said as the car drew up at the door.

The leaves of the door sprang open as if at the touch of a spring, and displayed the black-and-white squares in the hall that always made her feel as if she were stepping across a chess-board.

"Miss Pargiter's waiting in the drawing-room, m'lady," said the footman, taking her things.

"Waiting is she?" said Kitty. She looked at the clock with compunction. She was ten, no, she was fifteen minutes late, and she had kept Eleanor waiting. She hurried upstairs.

"I'm so sorry, Eleanor," she said as she opened the door. She looked round, for she did not see her at once in the large room. Where had they put her? she wondered. Then she saw her, over there by the fireplace in the large chair reading a newspaper.

"I'm so sorry," she repeated as she came across the room. "I've been walking in Richmond Park with your brother."

She kissed her, and then sat down by the tea-table on which a great silver kettle rode, like a ship swinging between two silver stays. Kitty was stiff with her usual shyness for a moment; and noticed the very white gloves that Eleanor held on her knee. But she was wearing her usual clothes; her usual ring; she was the same, now oldish, woman with whom she had broken the swing at Oxford years ago when they were young.

"How nice to see you!" she began. "And then I'm late. But it was Edward's fault. We had to go round by Piccadilly."

"Oh, don't mind that," said Eleanor. "I've been sitting here, in the lap of luxury." She put down the paper she had been reading, and took off her glasses.

"I met him at lunch," Kitty explained, as she fidgeted with the tea things. "And then we went for a walk; I'd not seen him for so long. He tells me," she added, "that he's going to be the new Master."

"He told you?" said Eleanor. "I thought it was a secret."

"So it is," Kitty laughed. "A profound secret—but I guessed."

"But Nigs told me—" Eleanor began.

"Nigs!" Kitty interrupted her. "That was the name! I couldn't remember. Nigs . . . Nigs," she said.

She carved herself a slice of cake and ate like a schoolboy, breaking off great mouthfuls. The dog came up to the table and sat there waiting for his share.

"Nigs didn't like you, did he, Sultan?" said Kitty, tossing him a curl of bread and butter.

"But," said Eleanor, hesitating a little, "I thought nothing had been settled yet." She too felt a little shy; her feeling of drowsiness returned to her. Kitty herself had changed slightly; she was all in black; she was not perhaps so highly groomed as she used to be. They had not met since her husband's death.

"Dear old Nigs. . . . No. It's not settled. But it will be," said Kitty. "How charming he is!" she added.

"D'you know what came over me in the Park?" she said suddenly. She looked at Eleanor opposite her. "I thought he was going to ask me to marry him again!" She felt quite at her ease, as if they were girls again.

"Wasn't it absurd?" she added.

Eleanor paused.

"I sometimes wish you had," she said.

"No. It wouldn't have done," said Kitty. "And he's done very well without me," she added.

"You made him very unhappy," said Eleanor, looking at Kitty and thinking of her as a girl.

"Did I?" said Kitty.

"Yes," said Eleanor. She remembered how Edward had cried, sitting on the edge of her bed, one night. Kitty stopped eating for a moment. She was surprised, but flattered. She could scarcely believe it; he had always made her feel such a boor.

"What a brute one is!" she said aloud. "How little one knows what other people are feeling!" She was silent for a moment. Then she drank up her tea and lit a cigarette.

"But I like him . . ." she said. "He's such a—what's the word I want?" She waved her hand. "Not 'gentleman'—it's what I feel with you, Nell; and with Martin, when he dined here, when we had a party here, and he said to me, 'What damned dull people you know, what damned bad pictures you have!'" She laughed and waved her cigarette at the portrait of herself over the fireplace. "I like it," she added. They have a standard, she was thinking, feeling largely flattered.

"Trust Martin to say what he thinks," said Eleanor; "especially if it's something disagreeable." She looked up at the picture. She had been looking at it while she waited.

"Who painted that?" she said.

"Oh, I forget," said Kitty, puffing her smoke out. "Thank heaven I shan't have to sit under it any longer."

"You're leaving?" said Eleanor, smoothing out her white gloves on the arm of her chair.

"Yes," said Kitty, "I'm only here tearing things up. There's a lot of things to tear up after thirty-six years. . . . I'm going to live in the country. I've bought a little house in the North . . ." She had a photograph of the house. She wanted to show it to Eleanor. It was a charming house; a little manor house, that had been used as a farm-house. She was going to alter it. But perhaps Eleanor would not be interested.

"It'll be a nice little house when I've altered it," she

said. "Quite small; quite humble. None of this. . . ." She waved her hand at the room, with its innumerable tables, chairs and ornaments.

Eleanor looked round; her eyes rested on an elaborate basket of flowers by the door in which each flower stood separate, as if a wire had been run through it.

"Always made me feel as if I were living in an hotel," said Kitty. "I always wanted to take a knife and scrape it all off. But what was the use? If I altered anything Charles used to come in and say 'Where's Uncle Bill on the old cob?' and back it had to go again," she laughed. It was the first time she had mentioned her husband. Why had she married him, Eleanor wondered, and not Edward? She thought of the good-natured man with the heavy face and the fine drooping eyes who used to march in when she was visiting Kitty and shake hands very cordially, and say "Lest we forget! Lest we forget!" reminding Kitty of some engagement; and then go out again rubbing his hands.

"I expect it looked very nice in the evening," she said, looking round her, "when there were lots of people about." The room had impressed her, as she sat waiting. She liked high rooms. There was an opulence about it. All her senses had seemed to expand as she sat there; with the footmen bringing in silver dishes, and all the papers laid head to head on a round table.

"Yes," Kitty agreed absentmindedly. "It did look nice sometimes, in the evening." In some ways she would mind leaving it, she thought. "But why a fire on a day like this?" she said.

There was a fire burning; and the room with its hothouse flowers was rather warm and sweet-scented. She got up and flung open the window. The noise of the street came in; they heard the rushing of wheels and the hooting of cars at the corner.

"I like big rooms," said Eleanor. She was comparing it with her own rather meagre flat. "I like the sense of space they give one."

"But you'd never come here," said Kitty. She was standing in front of the fire with her arms behind her back like a country gentleman.

"You always made some excuse, Nell, for not coming," she added, smiling at her.

"Did I? Yes. Perhaps I couldn't afford the clothes," said Eleanor, smiling back at her. She stooped and picked up one of the white gloves that had fallen on the floor.

"That's so silly," said Kitty, looking at the white glove.

"Not when you're young," said Eleanor. "When you're young you mind—not looking like other people." She looked at Kitty. She was very well dressed.

Kitty sat down again by the tea-table and took another cigarette.

"How nice it is not to be young," she said. "How nice not to mind what people think. . . . Now one can live as one likes," she added, lighting another cigarette. "Now that one's sixty."

They sat silent for a time, smoking their cigarettes and listening to the hooting of the cars under the window.

"Pity one can't live again," said Kitty suddenly. She held out her hands with the cigarette in them. They were strong hands with short, square-tipped fingers.

"Look at those hands," she said. "I ought to have

been a farmer. . . ."

She got up and strode about the room: she was always restless. She never seemed to altogether to fit in, Eleanor thought. She might be going to say something about her marriage. Perhaps she would, perhaps she would not. She was a queer mixture of candour and reserve. She was still very handsome; she moved vigorously. The dog got up and walked with her. When she reached the door he stopped, as if he expected her to go out. She ought to be walking on a moor with her dogs, Eleanor thought, looking at her. But she came back to the fireplace and stood with her hands behind her back.

"Human relationships aren't very satisfactory, are they?" she said. "It's so difficult to say what one feels." She was thinking of Edward; of their little random scraps of talk; of the sentence he had left unfinished as he stood on the pavement; and how Eleanor said she had made him unhappy.

"Just what we were saying last night," said Eleanor, wondering what she was thinking about, "at dinner."

Kitty looked at her. The words pricked her curiosity.

"Who were you dining with?" she asked.

"Oh, nobody you'd know," said Eleanor. "A foreigner." Kitty felt slightly nettled. She did not mean to tell her, she thought. What sort of people did Eleanor know, she wondered; whom did she dine with? Other people's lives always seem more interesting than one's own, she thought.

"And what did you say?" she asked.

What had they said? Eleanor could not remember. She saw again the smoky restaurant; a parrot in a cage; a girl with a feather in her hat; and Nicholas leaning across the little table, talking.

"Oh, just that . . ." she said. "How difficult it is to know people—how afraid we all are of each other." She stopped. She saw Nicholas touching the fingers of his hand with his familiar gesture.

"Afraid of each other?" said Kitty blankly. It was a new idea to her, it seemed. She considered it for a moment.

"That's true," she said, after a pause. "That's true of me anyhow." I was afraid of Edward this afternoon, she thought, afraid he was thinking me a fool. That was why she had made herself appear more brusque than she was; why she had talked to her dog. "Heel, Sultan! heel, Sultan!" she had said in order to cover up her shyness.

"But is it true of everybody?" she asked. It's not true of Eleanor, she was thinking.

"That's what we were saying," said Eleanor. It was one of the things that they had been saying; but they had said so many other things as well.

"You and your foreigner," said Kitty. She visualised a black man with a beard; the sort of man who wore a red tie. She felt a little envious; it sounded to her as if their evening had been so much more interesting than her evening. She had dined alone with her son and daughter-in-law. They had talked about racing.

"We were saying—" said Eleanor as Kitty waited, looking at her. She could not remember how the argument went. It was very difficult to repeat a conversation; she muddled things up. How had they reached that point about being afraid?

"Dressing up," she said suddenly. "Trying to make

out one is what one isn't," she paused. She was muddling it up. She flicked the white glove on her knee. "Isn't that because we are afraid?" she said. I bought these gloves in order to come here, she was thinking; but they ought to have been yellow.

"And power," she said suddenly, as if she had got her cue. That was what they had been arguing about, she remembered; that was what had started the conversation.

"Power?" said Kitty.

"Yes. People wanting power," said Eleanor; she could remember how it went now. But would Nicholas have been able to say all that here? she asked herself. Her eye rested on the gilt basket of flowers by the door. She smiled. No, she could not possibly tell Kitty what they had been talking about. Power, patriotism, love, sex and all the rest of it.

"But power's what people want," said Kitty. "They'll do any thing to get power."

She saw again the men filing into the drawing-room after dinner, and the women rising like a flock of gulls to receive them. Dear Eleanor, she thought, looking at her. She's very innocent. She hasn't seen as much of the world as I've seen. The thought pleased her rather.

"It's what they live for," she said, throwing away her cigarette. "And after all, it's human nature," she added, brushing away some of the ashes that had fallen on her lap.

"And we can't change . . ." Eleanor began.

"Human nature?" Kitty smiled. "I don't know," she said. "I find it quite hard to give up the little bit of power I had myself," she sighed. It was true. She still felt a lingering desire for the old life that she had disliked so much when she had it.

"No more people being nice to one; no more people making up to one, now that I'm pensioned off like an old servant," she said rather bitterly. Eleanor noticed the little wrinkles, the little hardnesses and hollows in her face that made her look her age as she spoke in spite of her vigour.

"But that's not what I mind," Kitty went on vehemently. "It's losing the place. It's the thought that I shall never walk in those woods again—" The tears started to her eyes; she pulled out her handkerchief, and dabbed them roughly like a schoolboy.

"Isn't it absurd," she said, "to cry for a wood when there's so much else to cry for? But walking with Edward, hearing the pigeons this afternoon—" She blew her nose. That is what she minds, Eleanor thought; not his death.

"That's what I mind," said Kitty. "Anybody can have this—" she waved her hand round the room. ". . . all the people who used to come here; the women such fools, and the men only caring for their sport, their politics . . ." She broke off. That's what she minds Eleanor thought, leaving a place.

They sat listening to the dull sound of traffic that came through the open window. Somebody was playing a cornet in the street below; the dismal strain wailed through the air as if a dog had lifted up its head and was baying for the moon. The horns hooted; the cornet wailed; it was disturbing; unrestful. Like a piece of jangled music, Eleanor thought as she sat there listening.

"And what a mess they made of it!" Kitty added, throwing away her cigarette. "What a horrible mess!"

The little clock on the mantelpiece chimed the hour with quick, petulant strokes. Eleanor began to draw on her gloves, pulling the fingers down, for they were new and fitted tightly.

"Well," she said rising, "perhaps the younger generation—"

"No, no," said Kitty. She picked up one of the illustrated papers and glanced at a shiny brown photograph of a race meeting.

"They're just the same—Ann, my daughter-in-law," she said. She pointed to a woman in tailor-made clothes with field-glasses slung round her shoulders at a race meeting. "Just the same," she said. She threw the paper away. She got up.

"But you must come and stay with me in the country," she said, "when I've got my house ready."

She wanted to fetch the photograph, but perhaps Eleanor would be bored.

"It'll be quite a nice little house when I've cut down the trees and dug up the beds. It's a little Tudor manor-house. . . ."

Eleanor had put on both her gloves now and was standing by the window.

"I'll come if you ask me," she said. Kitty stood beside her looking out over the square. "Next spring then—that's a promise," she said. "Spring's so lovely up there," she added. She looked down on the usual stream of business people who were hurrying along after their day's work. It was the crowded hour. The pavement under the trees was dappled with floating shadow; the little figures, foreshortened from this height, looked oddly insubstantial as they went in and out of the floating lights, and the shadows. And all round them were the great ring of houses, red gold in the evening haze.

"How I hate London!" Kitty exclaimed.

"How I love it!" said Eleanor. They both laughed.

"People are so interesting," said Eleanor. "I couldn't, live in the country." She was looking at the man who had been playing the cornet. He had stopped playing and was holding out his cap to each passer-by. Two, three, four people went by without stopping. But the fifth, one of those shabby-looking old women who are always to be seen in London squares, stopped, fumbled in her purse and dropped in a copper. Eleanor smiled.

"I knew she would!" she said, turning round.

"Well, we shan't convert each other," said Kitty, turning away. "And where are you off to now?" she asked, as she walked with her towards the door. "Some Committee?"

"No," said Eleanor rather awkwardly; "nowhere in particular." She won't tell me, Kitty thought. She is hiding her life as we all do. A queer feeling of blankness, of frustration, came over her as she stopped at the door. She broke off one of the hothouse flowers and gave it to Eleanor.

"A flower for your buttonhole, Nell," she said, giving it her.

"But that's a shame . . ." said Eleanor, looking at the velvety streaked petals.

"It'll only die in this hot room," said Kitty. "No, Sultan," she said, pulling the dog back. "You've got to stay with me." She shut the door.

Eleanor made her way down the great staircase. A

large picture with pale-green water and lemon-coloured buildings hung on the wall. Venice? she said to herself. She would have liked to stop and look at it, but there were flunkies lurking somewhere, she supposed; and holding herself rather more erect than usual, she passed on down the stairs. Bright sunshine made an angle across the black-and-white squares. There was some commotion in the hall; a lady was coming in; the footman was holding the door open for a young woman in black. They passed each other in the hall. She was tall and fair and dressed very simply in black. She bent her head with a veiled smile of discreet courtesy as she passed Eleanor, for they did not know each other.

"Ann—the daughter-in-law," Eleanor thought. She recognised her from the picture in the illustrated paper. "The woman at the races," she thought. "But black suits her better," she thought. She was very lovely.

The footman asked her if she had a car. No, and she did not want him to call a taxi; she would walk. She wanted to walk; she felt the need to walk off some little quickening of feeling, caused by,—what? The big room; the staircase; the footman; the lady in black.

Her lips moved as she walked.

. . . dressed in black, just as I came out, very lovely, Kitty's daughter-in-law, she said as she walked on without thinking where she was going. "I went to tea with Kitty," she went on, arranging the story to tell somebody. Yes, I went to tea with her, she said. She went—she'd been walking in the Park with Edward. We talked of Edward. . . . Have I forgotten my bag? she asked herself suddenly. No, she had it under her arm, but she was holding the flower so tight in her abstraction that she did not know that she was also holding her bag. Her lips began to move again as she stood on the pavement to let the traffic go by. We talked about Edward, she said, going on with her story. I don't think that she's very happy. . . . She's restless. . . . She's going to live by herself in the country. . . . A little house in the North.

She crossed the road. There was something that she wanted to tell somebody about Kitty; something that had struck her at the time; something that had seemed to her interesting; but she could not get hold of it in this crowd. Here she came to a shop window in which she saw her own reflection against a mound of some black stuff. So that's what I looked like, she said to herself, putting her hand to her hat. My hat's on one side. Was it like that all the time? she asked herself. She hoped not. There were dresses in the window; evening dresses and muslin summer frocks with ribbons floating, semi-transparent. For the young, she said to herself, thinking how charming they were. Then her gaze rested on a gold-spotted dress with a long skirt. That's the sort of dress I might wear, she thought. I still feel it, she mused. That was the feeling, she thought, looking at the dress; she remembered the feeling of bare arms, and skirts twining round her ankles. That was the feeling, she thought, remembering the old sensation as she came into a room of glitter, of festivity; and she turned to a young woman who was standing beside her, gazing at the clothes. There was something avid, feasting, like the rapture of a butterfly on a flower in the eyes of the young woman, edging closer to the window, sizing up the clothes quickly, and then fastening her gaze on the thin flounced muslin. Yes, that was the feeling, said Eleanor, as if the

girl's feeling had transmitted itself and supplemented her own.

I went to tea with a cousin who lives in Grosvenor Square, she began again. But now she was telling the story to Nicholas, because he was always interested in hearing about other people's lives. A Rigby, she married a man called Lasswade. It's a very big house . . . a great high room full of furniture. . . . But I doubt if you'd have found it easy, she continued, to say exactly what you thought. She smiled, as she remembered her own attempt to repeat the argument. My brother Edward was in love with her, she broke off. Very much in love . . . very much, she went on. He sat on the edge of my bed; he cried. It was in the paper, I think, or I had had a letter . . .

The crowd bothered her. She turned down a back street. There were always dingy streets just behind the shopping streets; streets that were rather empty; streets that were full of warehouses; houses that had been turned into workshops. She glanced automatically into the basements as she walked.

I remember, I read it out, she continued, "Kitty's engaged. . . ." And he said nothing; we were all there. . . . She stopped. There was a man in an apron down in the basement working at a case of type. She watched him. His bare arms were veined and his fingers were knotted, but they were incredibly dexterous. She watched him, fascinated by the way he flicked type into a great box with many compartments; there, there, there; rapidly, expertly; until, becoming conscious of her gaze, he looked up over his spectacles and smiled at her. She smiled back. Then he went on, making his quick half-conscious movements.

She had forgotten what she was saying. She walked on. This is the part of London I like, she thought, looking along the narrow eighteenth-century street where all the houses were let out in work-rooms, in apartments, and yet kept some tinge of ancient dignity. I like this part of London, she repeated. Her tension, her grip she had kept on her flower, on her bag, had relaxed. A fig tree grew out of the basement here; its leaves were beginning to unfurl; its branches spread a wide pattern over the wall. Within she could see women, ironing pink and blue stuff on long trestle tables. She stood and watched them; the irons ran over the crumpled stuff, leaving it pressed out and smooth. The sensation transmitted itself to her own body.

How quickly, she said, as she walked on, one loses the—what do you call it? She meant the tingling, the tension, that she had felt when she came out of the big house, and saw the woman coming across the angle of light in her exquisite clothes. It had become a picture now; she could look at it impersonally. The face was hard, she thought; the eyes glassy, perhaps. . . . What did Kitty say about her when she threw down the paper? She could not remember. But she could see Kitty walking up and down the room with the dog following her. And I thought to myself, she continued, Now she's going to confide in me—But she didn't. . . . The tears came into her eyes though. Yes, that was interesting; her feeling about the woods, the place—"That's what I mind," she said. That's what she minded, she said, turning to Nicholas again; not his death, but leaving the place, down in the country. . . . You may say it's ridiculous, she continued, but then, people are like that. It's human nature, Nicholas! And

if you'd been there, she asked him, could you have spoken perfectly freely? I wonder.

She looked along the street. It was somewhere here that she had dined the night before. It was the foreign quarter. The shops had French and Italian names over them; they sold macaroni; they sold red rubber tubes. It was a dubious neighbourhood. There were people standing at a bar gesticulating. The chairs and little tables in front of doors reminded her of Italy or of France. Children seemed to pullulate. They were playing in the road. They were squatting on doorsteps. A woman came towards her with the swaying movement of a woman about to have a child. She had the suffering, drugged look of a person whose whole energies are absorbed in some physical process. And my mother . . . Eleanor thought, looking at her as she passed. My mother . . . She seldom thought of her mother, but now the brass bed, the sallow picture of the man in uniform, with a high light on his nose, hanging above it, and her mother lying there, came before her. She had ten, she thought. Ten, counting the three who died. And Papa, she thought . . . He had hidden the letters in the long drawer of the bureau, the letters from the lady with yellow hair. What had their relationship been, she wondered—her father's and her mother's? Had they been "in love?" Perhaps. But it was too long ago; too far away; she could not remember her mother, for all the children she had borne! she was a shadow lying there.

That was where we dined last night, she said as she passed a restaurant with bay trees in tubs. There was the grey parrot on the counter; and that was where we sat, she thought, looking at an empty table in the corner. They had sat on and on and on, talking. But I won't dine with you again, she said to herself, seeing him put his hand in his pocket, unless you let me pay my share. It's all very well, she added, to say you're making enough to live on now . . . but I won't dine with you unless you let me pay my share. It was I who ordered the wine. He's so easy in some ways, she thought; so conventional in others. About being nobly born, she smiled. Oh that family, the Poles, the noble Poles, from whom he was descended—how they bored her! But when he talks about what he's doing, about his work in the hospital, she added, then I love him: then we can talk all night. Then she felt, remembering the argument again, the complicated argument, it's like being two minds looking at the same thing from different angles, so that I can tell you any silly little story like this, about going to tea. . . .

A child was running along the gutter; and she guarded it half consciously with her eyes, holding herself ready to dart forward if it ran out into the street; for she heard a car coming. But the car passed; and the child ran on. She roused herself. She looked round to see where she was.

Everything seemed to stand out in sharper relief than usual. It was a fine spring evening. The street hummed with the swarm of people who were walking down the middle of the road. There was the usual barrel organ. The shops were still open; the shabby miscellaneous shops of this foreign quarter; but there was a sense of relief from work; of people standing at their doors, lounging about talking. She felt as if she were abroad—in France, or Italy; in some Southern country where the heat seemed to generate a feeling of

well-being. Even the beggars, she remembered, seem to enjoy life in Italy. It was late though; she was a long way from home.

"Why should I go back though?" she said aloud, looking at her watch. There was still a whole section—she took its measure at a glance—to do what she liked with. Her freedom from ties still sometimes came on her with a clap of surprise. Nobody was expecting her. So I can do what I like, she said, hesitating. How can I make the most of this?—she saw the section; it was roughly four hours. She felt in a mood to enjoy herself. Her mind was full; her being brimmed populous with sights, with sounds, with half realised ideas. She had been talking to Kitty; to Nicholas; then to herself. She had been bringing things together; building up new combinations as she walked; adding fresh ideas to old ones. Every sight, every sound, the man in the basement, the women ironing, the clothes, the people in the streets—all seemed to her to add themselves up easily and naturally. She walked on.

It's not being with people as much as being with them, friendship, she thought, looking at the long French rolls with their crisp crust in a baker's shop, as she passed. Why, then, regret death, the death of the body, or age, if that's true? she said, looking at the loaves; life may be more real when one's not living it? who knows? Except of course, she added, that "I" have to be—the thought slipped her.

"Latest winners," she read on a placard. A great deal of betting went on here. San Toy. Gemini. Star of the East—those are the names of racehorses, she thought. A great deal of betting went on here. These men in shirt sleeves, for example. Who's the Derby favourite this year, she wondered? For it would soon be Derby Day. She had a mind to go there this year with Renny, who had a passion for racing. She found herself in Oxford Street. But I must dine somewhere. Who could I dine with? she asked herself. She had had enough of solitary musing; she wanted to hand her thoughts on to somebody else; so that they could be changed and broken up and given a body to. "Who could I dine with?" she said aloud. She ran over a list of names. Delia was in Ireland; Martin—he would be dining out; Morris had his family; and then and then and then— She rejected them all for one reason or another. She had left it too late. She stood still in the crowd that pressed down Oxford Street. The sun was setting and the windows were lit. People came by with rosy faces. Some came quickly, as if they had engagements; others strolled lounging and looking about them as if they were merely taking the air; enjoying themselves. The weight of the day was off them! they too, she guessed, felt what she was feeling—garrulous, sociable, inclined for conversation. But how could she stop them and talk to them? It was absurd to let all this stir, potency, fecundity, run to waste, it was pouring past unused. Here was a man with a chip out of his cheek who looked as if he had knocked about the world; he passed! and another, trim, shaven, hollow-cheeked, who reminded her of her brother Morris; a nice man; in some office, she guessed; he passed; and another and another and another, all those nondescript elderly women whose existence puzzled her; and then a woman with bright little eyes, and a great flop of white hair, wearing a sprigged muslin dress under an old fur coat.

Eleanor laughed aloud. Why walk down Oxford Street wearing white tennis-shoes? she asked herself. She looked at the jaunty, disreputable, amusing old woman, pecking her way along the street, rather side-long, capriciously, like a bird on a perch. But she checked her merriment. She wished she had somebody to laugh with. Sally? she thought suddenly. She loved laughing: she was a born mimic. But it was too late, she thought; and she walked on, smiling. And why not laugh, she asked herself. For she had half-blamed Sally for laughing. Why do we always blame the laughers? she asked herself. Why stick seriousness as a label on top of—hats? she added inconsequently; she was passing a hat shop with a flight of hats on rods. Why not laughter? No, I'm not like that, she said, seeing her own reflection in the glass; her respectable elderly woman's reflection. Kitty had ticked her off to her irritation as a woman who sat on Committees, she thought. Where are you off to? Some Committee? she had said. I've done with all that nonsense long ago, she said to herself. But I must dine somewhere. I shall dine by myself; I shall have a good dinner and a bottle of wine, she said, looking about her for a restaurant. But there were only dress shops.

A feeling of expansion, of freedom from surface-marks of identification, possessed her. [That's the advantage of growing old, she thought; as Kitty said; one needn't care what other people think; for they always think wrong—always, always. . . .] It's a good state, age; she thought; as Kitty was saying: one needn't care what other people think: no need to pose; no need to cut a figure any more; one can be oneself. Don't you agree, Nicholas, she asked him, that it's best—she held her hand out, holding her flower, that it's best,—she tried to remember one of his pompous phrases, for he had never got the hang of English; he still used phrases like “exposing the greatest possible surface of the soul”—don't you think it's best, she repeated. Without disguises? She saw him again; touching the outspread fingers of his hands. But he bored her sometimes with his theories: with his ancestors. That she had thought before.

She looked up. When one began to repeat a thought, it was a sign one should change the subject—ask somebody to dine. But who can I ask . . . she began; and then lost the end of the sentence, because the sky above the roofs of the big shops reminded her, with its look of a blue-tinted ceiling, with one plume of fiery cloud, with its aloof alien look, that was so incongruous above the fretted outline of chimneys, of another scene; of the country. She was in the country; walking down a Welsh valley alone. And a little black solitary figure came down the hillside opposite; came nearer and nearer; till they both stopped beside a thorn-tree at the same moment; and said Good day, and stood there talking. He was a builder from Cardiff, she remembered; going to visit his mother who was ill in a farm; and he had written his name on a page of his pocket-book in case she ever came there, and she gave him her name, not liking to feel, as they parted, that they would never meet again.

Which was natural, she said. Human beings like each other surely, by nature—she turned to Renny; don't they Renny? By nature, surely they do? she repeated; turning to Renny, whom she loved, because he always said, “Eleanor, don't be a fool.” He always

said what he thought. Perhaps I could dine with them? she thought. Shall I ring them up? No, she thought, shaking her head as she passed a post-office, when people are so happy they are glad to be alone together in the evening. “Damn that telephone,” he would say; and Maggie, letting fall her socks . . . But she must dine. She was hungry. Here, she said; and stopped short; as if all the time she had been meaning to dine at this very place.

It was a large restaurant; cheerful, opulent-looking. She pushed through the revolving doors. There was an instant buzz and chatter as she came in, which she liked. It at once dissipated all her thoughts. The roar of the street seemed to have found a human voice. Not a word could be distinguished, but there was a general babble of sound. They were all eating, talking, companioned. It seemed as she stood there for a moment, as if she had come in upon a festival already in full swing. But there was no empty seat; all the tables were already taken.

She was about to go up the marble stairs to see if there were a place in the upper room, when, just as she moved, a man at a table in the corner rose and left. She went and took his seat. A waitress leant over the table, swept it clean of crumbs and glasses, and placed a coffee-splashed card in front of her. Then she dashed off somewhere else. What shall I have, Eleanor asked herself, looking at the menu. The three-and-sixpenny dinner? Yes, it saved the trouble of thinking; and she would order half a bottle of wine.

She laid her bag, her gloves and her flower on the table-cloth and waited. She liked the look of the place. Everyone looked festive. On each table an electric lamp burnt red through a tight shade fringed with glass beads. All the faces therefore were tinged with pink light. And everybody was in their best clothes.

There was the usual music; somewhere behind a column they were playing the usual waltz. But it was distant—a pulse of sound merely that surged up and down beneath the clatter. She sat there listening and looking about her, amused, distracted by the many voices, by the many movements all round her. They were very busy; people were coming in and going out. She waited. Gradually she became aware of a thudding sound in the background. She identified it. From where she sat, rather at the back, rather at one side, she could see a swing door opening and shutting. A file of waitresses went in; came out; they went in with dirty plates; they came out with the clean ones. She caught a glimpse of them snatching their dishes from a counter in the kitchens beyond. The machine at this hour of the evening was working smoothly but at full pressure. All the time new diners kept arriving; passing between the tables; coming in; going out. She waited.

She looked about her. At the next table was a couple dining together; a young man and a girl. They had finished one course; and they were waiting too. The girl had opened her bag and was carefully and deliberately powdering her face; then she took out a little stick and reddened her lips. The young man hitched up his trousers and nonchalantly, as if half consciously, ran his hand through his hair as he caught sight of himself in the glass. He might be a salesman in a motor-car business, she thought, and she a girl in a manicure

establishment, for they were both rather lustrous and shiny. And they were both on their best behaviour. “Preening,” Eleanor said to herself with a smile. That is, she added, showing off; acting a part, naturally, she thought, after their day's work in a shop.

Then the *hors-d'œuvre* was dabbed down in front of her—little pink strips of fish and a potato salad. There was not much to it, she thought as she tasted the skimpy food, but it was a change from what one had at home after all. She poured out her wine; she never drank wine when she was alone either. And what, she wondered, as she glanced covertly at the couple at the next table, are they pretending to be? Something gay, smart, up to date and shiny—like the people in the illustrated papers? she wondered. They were neither of them quite at their ease; they were on their best behaviour, curious of people looking at them. She swallowed her *hors-d'œuvre*; it was salty and slippery and not very agreeable. . . . Still. . . . She waited.

How long are they going to keep me waiting? she asked, glancing at the menu. It was a long one. Five courses; *hors-d'œuvre*; fish; meat; pudding; dessert. It might have been better to order one dish and have done with it, she thought. She watched the waitresses hurrying round, half turning as they hurried, to pacify customers who were getting impatient. The swing doors seemed to thud more and more quickly. At last her own waitress, whom she had marked because of her queer pale face and a twist in her mouth, approached, dealing plates as she passed. To Eleanor she dealt a plate of white fish with pink blobs on it. She looked jaded and harassed.

“Very busy tonight?” said Eleanor. She wanted to make her smile naturally.

“Yes'm,” murmured the waitress as she turned, with a little twitch of her lip as if it hurt her to depart from the pursed-up expression which was somehow connected, Eleanor felt, with the weight of the tray she was carrying. It must be heavy—all those dishes, carried in front of one like that.

The music burst out again.

They oughtn't to make her carry all that, Eleanor thought, prompted, perhaps by the burst of music, sentimental as it was, to a sudden rush of pity. They could easily afford, she thought, looking round at the crowded room, more waitresses. They must make huge profits. She began to eat her fish. It was an insipid fish, watery and full of bones. She looked at the menu. We don't want all this, she said, looking at the long list of courses that still remained to be eaten. Why not have one dish; and that a good one? That's what we want; then why don't we have it? she asked, laying her knife and fork down. She pushed away the little pile of skin and bones. Why do they force us to have all this? Why can't we say . . . She yawned slightly. Her mind flagged. She wished that there was somebody to talk to; or failing that, something that she could read. But she had forgotten to buy a paper. She sat there listening to the thudding of the doors; to the violins scrambling over the notes so that they missed the tune. She listened. There was no tune; it was only a scramble of bungled notes.

It was getting hot too. People had begun smoking; the smoke hung down. A weight, made of the heat, and the clatter, and the thud and the music, seemed to be laid on top of her head. She felt as if a headache

were beginning. She put her knife and fork together. She had finished her fish. She had nothing to do but sit and look at her own smeared plate. Her exultation was ebbing.

Though the music continued, the glow, the dazzle and the gaiety were going. The clothes that had seemed at first sight so festive, now seemed, as she looked round her, drab; browns and blacks; almost all the same. At each table there was a respectable middle-aged couple, passively eating, passively waiting. And what was the next course? She looked. Poulet Marengo—some kind of titivated chicken she supposed. Whatever it was, they took their time about it. She opened her bag in case she had something there to read. But she had read both the card and the letter. The card was from Miriam, in Italy. It was the usual picture postcard; great white oxen standing in an olive garden with flaps hanging down beneath their chins; an arch behind them; cypresses, and something scribbled on the top about being back on Saturday and sitting in the sun. She put it down. The letter was from her nephew North, in Africa; but she had read it before. It was a non-committal nephew's letter about sheep; and the drought, and how some man she had never heard of had gone away so that he was alone on the farm. She used to like North, but he had been abroad so long she scarcely knew him now, she thought, as she pushed the letter back into its envelope. She looked blankly at the table before her. There was the silver vase with its one carnation; the pink lamp with its fringe of beads; and the orchid that Kitty had given her, lying among the metal knives and forks on the coarse table-cloth. Dazed by the noise and the ineffective efforts of the orchestra to impose some sort of tune upon the jumbled mass of notes, her eye rested upon the table impassively. Things seemed to lose their meanings. That's an odd assembly of objects, she thought, dully observing the shapes and positions of the things on the table; though they were knife, fork and flower, they had for a moment lost their identity. Black marks on a white ground they seemed to be for a moment; a pattern; something fixed. If there were a pattern, she mused, what would it be? If accidentally scattered objects, were yet in order? If to a mind outside her mind they meant something? as to a painter they meant something? If there were a world beyond this world . . . but the thought slipped.

She raised her hand and beckoned to the waitress; but her waitress had vanished through the swing doors. How would it be, she began again, if this fork, this knife, this flower and my hand—she laid it on the table—were thought together by another mind, so that what seemed accidental—vegetable, animal, metal—were in fact all one? She looked at her hand. There it lay. Then she roused herself. What nonsense I'm thinking, she said, and took up the flower Kitty had given her, and looked at it. It was an orchid, streaked and pouched, with the exotic beauty of those strange flowers. It had a row of yellow dots on its pale-yellow pouch.

She drummed on the table. She wished she could attract somebody's attention. She wanted somebody—anybody—that man reading the paper for example—to take her thoughts and carry them out of this broken darkness into some hard certainty. She tried to hear what they were saying at the next table. But they were

completely silent. There they sat, staring, as if they had ceased to exist, as if they had come to a blank wall, and stood staring at it. Nothing is more depressing, she thought, than the look of people sitting silent over their food. Say something, she felt inclined to cry aloud. Speak!

The orchestra which had faded into silence, now burst into its tune again. They always started with a rush, all together; and the first notes, striking into a rhythm, even though it always petered out, threw her mind on again. Listening to music, even to cheap music, always until it became boring, ran things together. For a moment as she looked at the table; it seemed to her that the connection she had half grasped now ran between the different things; as if she could live from the fork to the flower, from the flower—she put out her hand and touched it—to the spoon. Adventurously, boldly, as you would say, Nicholas, she thought. Adventurously, boldly, she thought, half shutting her eyes; yes boldly, adventurously, since we know so little, about anything is: from the fork to the flower; she smiled. And so, she continued, speaking to herself, and raising her hand to her head conscious as she was of pressure on the top of her head, break up this weight, this unreality, the dumb passivity—she looked at the couple again; they were still staring ahead of them. Break it up? Break it up! she said, tapping lightly on the table. They haven't said a thing to each other for the last five minutes, she thought. Not a thing; and yet here they are having a night out together and they haven't said a thing.

She turned abruptly. Would they never bring her chicken marengo? There was no sign of her waitress. Why was I such a fool as to come here? she asked herself, when I might have cooked my own dinner, at home?

She tapped urgently on the table. It's the only way, she thought; nobody is going to attend to me unless I make a fuss. She tapped again. The man who was reading a paper propped on the cruet near her looked up. She tapped again. And now the waitress came and slapped her chicken down on the table in front of her. She took up her knife and fork hastily and began to eat. But it was not appetising. There was only a rag of flesh on the skinny little bird; and it was luke-warm. It must have been waiting on the counter, forgotten. She had soon finished it. Now she would have to wait again. The next course was what? She looked at the couple next her. They were always a course ahead of her, and now they were eating something whitish out of a metal cup.

"Pêche Melba," she concluded, looking at the menu; that's what it is. But why do they make us have all these courses? Why do they do it? She looked at the menu. The restaurant was owned by a large company; it had branches all over London; there was a list of them. But who are the people who do it? she wondered who is it who makes us eat through a dinner like this? Some rich man? Some company with a rich man on top? A rich man who began very humbly, and then—she had finished her chicken and pushed the smeared plate away from her—like that man whom Celia's always grumbling about—what's his name? The one who built a house; the one who spoilt the view—"but one has to be nice to them because they're so rich"—she could not remember his name. But she could see

him. He walks about like an advertisement of riding breeches, she thought. And they all laughed at him, because he rode to hounds without knowing "the stem of a hound from the stern"—was that the expression? Anyhow they laughed at him. . . . What apes and cats we are, she thought, lifting her glass but the wine was poor; taking his money and laughing at him . . . what apes and cats we are, she thought, for whatever aspect of life presented itself to her seemed at the moment equally sordid; and connected with the smeared plate and the skinny bird. But here her Pêche Melba was delivered. It was a greyish-white mound that slipped about, already half melted, at the bottom of a metal cup.

The couple at the next table had eaten theirs; they had finished; they were going. The young man was paying the bill; the girl was setting her hat straight at her little hand mirror. They were still acting; the young man, as he surveyed his silver nonchalantly was acting some rich man; the girl, arranging her hat coquettishly sideways, was acting some rich girl—some Lady-this-or-that in the illustrated papers. Why must they do it. Eleanor asked herself, lifting her spoon to her lips, when they're not like that? She watched them. As they got up they turned and smiled at each other. When they're so nice underneath, she added. They disappeared through the swing doors.

She swallowed a spoonful of the sweet stuff; but it had a distinct taste of salt in it. She put down the spoon again; it was impossible to eat it. She would get her bill and go. But her waitress had disappeared again. She sat looking about her. In front of her were pillars cased in imitation marble; then there were arches with horse-shoes of fretted woodwork that reminded her of the Alhambra. It seemed to be a combination, what with the plush and the arches of Buckingham Palace and the Alhambra, she thought. There was not a square foot free from ornament of some kind. At one side, in order to cut off the kitchens, there was a glass screen; but even the screen had leaves painted on it. Vine leaves, she said to herself, looking at them. And last year she had been in Italy, and had sat in the courtyard of a little inn under a vine. And the man said to me, she thought, remembering a scene, "Take it," when I admired the jar with olives in it. "It belonged to my wife," he said. And here we have glass beads on pink lamp-shades, she thought, pushing away her metal cup still half full of the whitish-grey liquid. She would pay her bill and go.

She saw her waitress attending to the next table. Two men in bowler hats had taken the seats of the couple who had just left. The waitress had brushed off the crumbs; tidied the table; and was placing the menu before them. Eleanor beckoned to her. Now they're going to eat through the whole of that dinner again, she thought. It irritated her unreasonably that they should be going to eat through the whole of that dinner again. She beckoned. But the waitress was attending to the City men; she saw one of them wink at her as he gave his order. She beckoned. At last the waitress came and totted up her bill. Then she paused; she held her pencil suspended as if to make sure that nothing had been forgotten.

"No, I didn't have coffee," Eleanor said, to help her. "Half a bottle of wine, but no coffee," she said. She watched her adding up the sum. She looked harrassed.